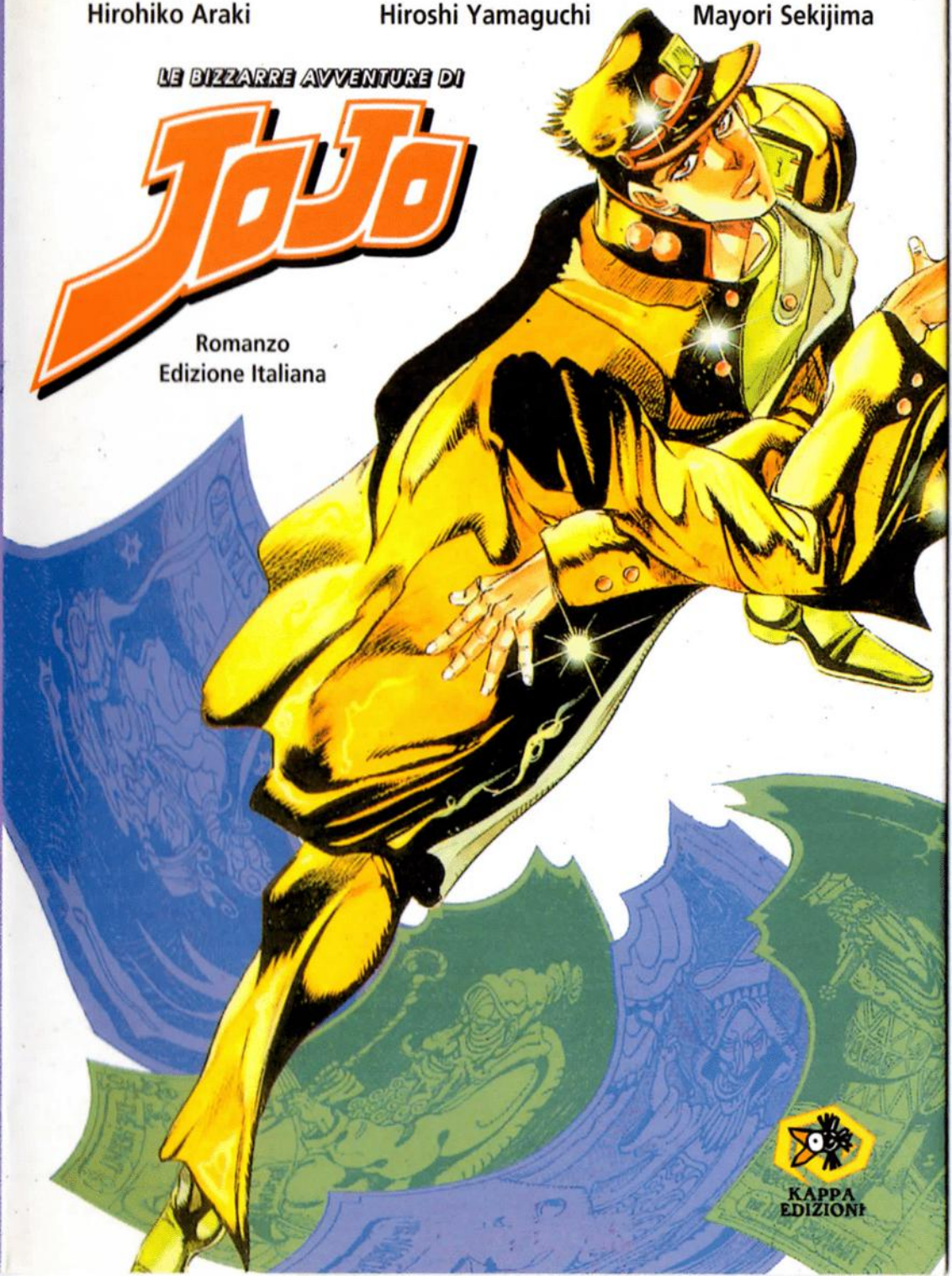
Hirohiko Araki Hiroshi Yamaguchi Mayori Sekijima

LE BIZZARRE AVVENTURE DI

JoJo

Romanzo
Edizione Italiana



KAPPA EDIZIONI

JoJo's Bizarre Adventure started out in 1987 as a manga miniseries, but it was such a great success that the audiences loudly requested a sequel. Thus Hirohiko Araki gave origin to a new part, which he bravely decided would take place decades later, where the main character would be a descendant of the first story's protagonist. It was like this that the first (and perhaps only) action "generational saga" of the manga world was born, where the main characters of the various parts passed on the torch through family bonds, with the passing of time. Today, sixteen years after its debut, *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* has six distinct parts, encompassing a total of eighty volumes. It has been published in Italy with growing success by Edizioni Star Comics, and it's the only manga to have reached the record of ten years of uninterrupted publishing.

The story this book contains tells completely new events, never narrated in the original comics, and constitutes an enjoyable spin off taking place in the third part, of which the mood, the strangeness, and the geniality remained unchanged.

ジョジョの奇妙な冒険

JOJO'S BIZARRE ADVENTURE

荒木飛呂彦

関島眞頼●山口宏

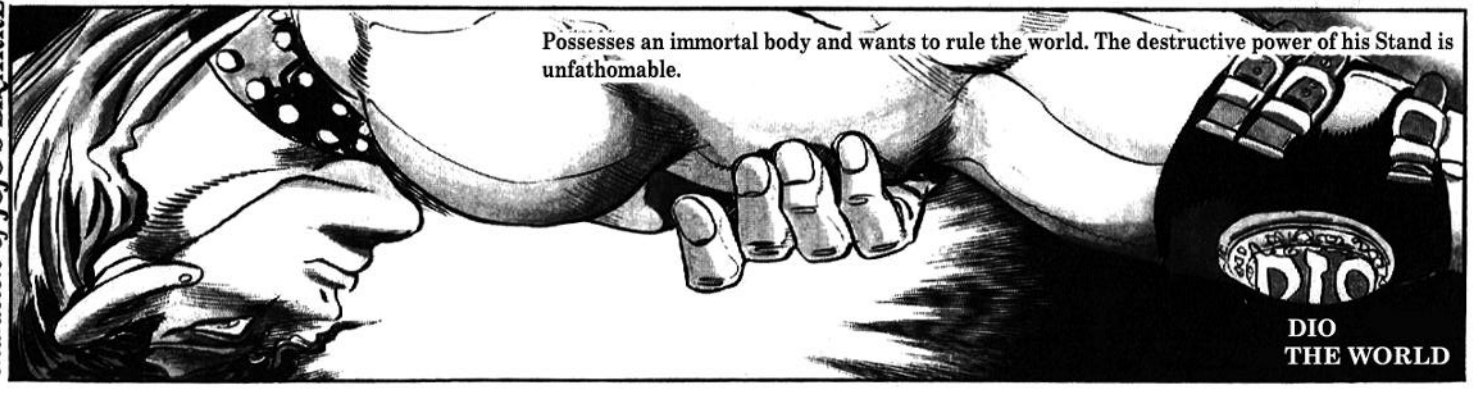
JOTARO KUJO
STAR PLATINUM

He's Japanese and a descendant of the Joestars. His Star Platinum is an unbeatable Stand that combines strength and precision.

JOSEPH JOESTAR
HERMIT PURPLE

Jotaro's grandfather. Together they set out to defeat Dio. His Hermit Purple is a remarkable Stand with clairvoyant abilities.

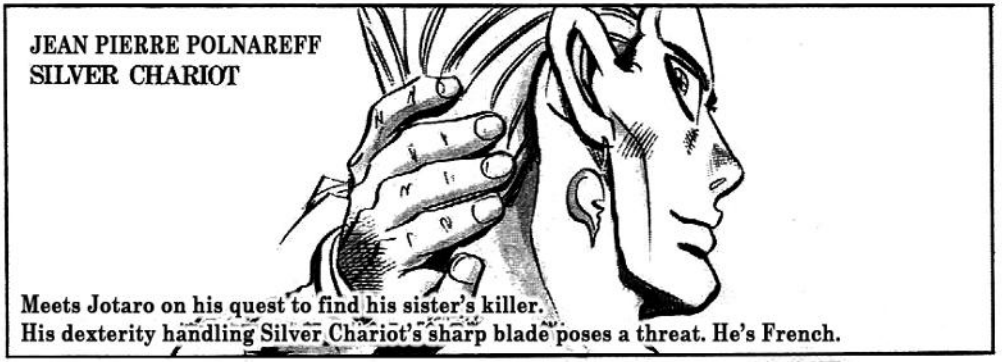
Possesses an immortal body and wants to rule the world. The destructive power of his Stand is unfathomable.



DIO
THE WORLD

MOHAMMED ABDUL
MAGICIANS RED

A fortune teller
and Joestar's friend. His Magician's Red can manipulate fire at will. He's Egyptian.

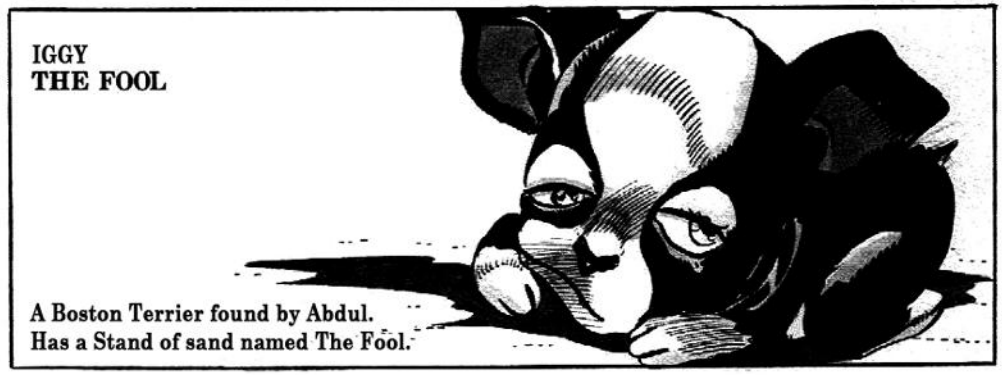


JEAN PIERRE POLNAREFF
SILVER CHARIOT

Meets Jotaro on his quest to find his sister's killer.
His dexterity handling Silver Chariot's sharp blade poses a threat. He's French.

NORIAKI KAKYOIN
HIEROPHANT GREEN

Attends the same high school as Jotaro.
The destructive power of his Hierophant Green's Emerald Splash is tremendous.

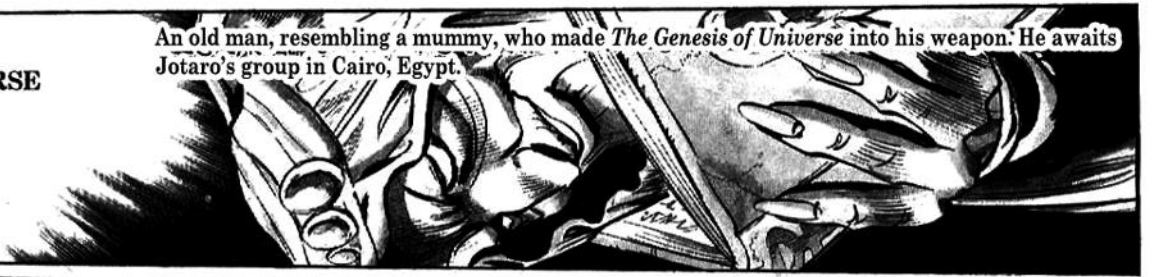


IGGY
THE FOOL

A Boston Terrier found by Abdul.
Has a Stand of sand named The Fool.

characters of JOJO'S BIZARRE ADVENTURE

THE SCRIBE ANI
THE GENESIS OF UNIVERSE



An old man, resembling a mummy, who made *The Genesis of Universe* into his weapon. He awaits Jotaro's group in Cairo, Egypt.

ABSALOM
SATANIC COUPLER

Uses a Stand that lies in the Nubian desert.
His Satanic Coupler, a mad rushing locomotive, hinders the progress of Jotaro and his comrades.

MICHAL
DARK MIRAGE

Absalom's younger sister. Wielded by a shy pretty girl, her Dark Mirage creates a deranged world.

JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: The Genesis of Universe

Translated mostly from Italian, but also Japanese
by Lesbicattiva and AzoreanEve

December 2019 – May 2020

Italian translation by Michela Gorgoglione

This is a work of fiction; any resemblance to real people, events, or organisations is purely coincidental.
This is a fan project; it isn't meant to be profited from.

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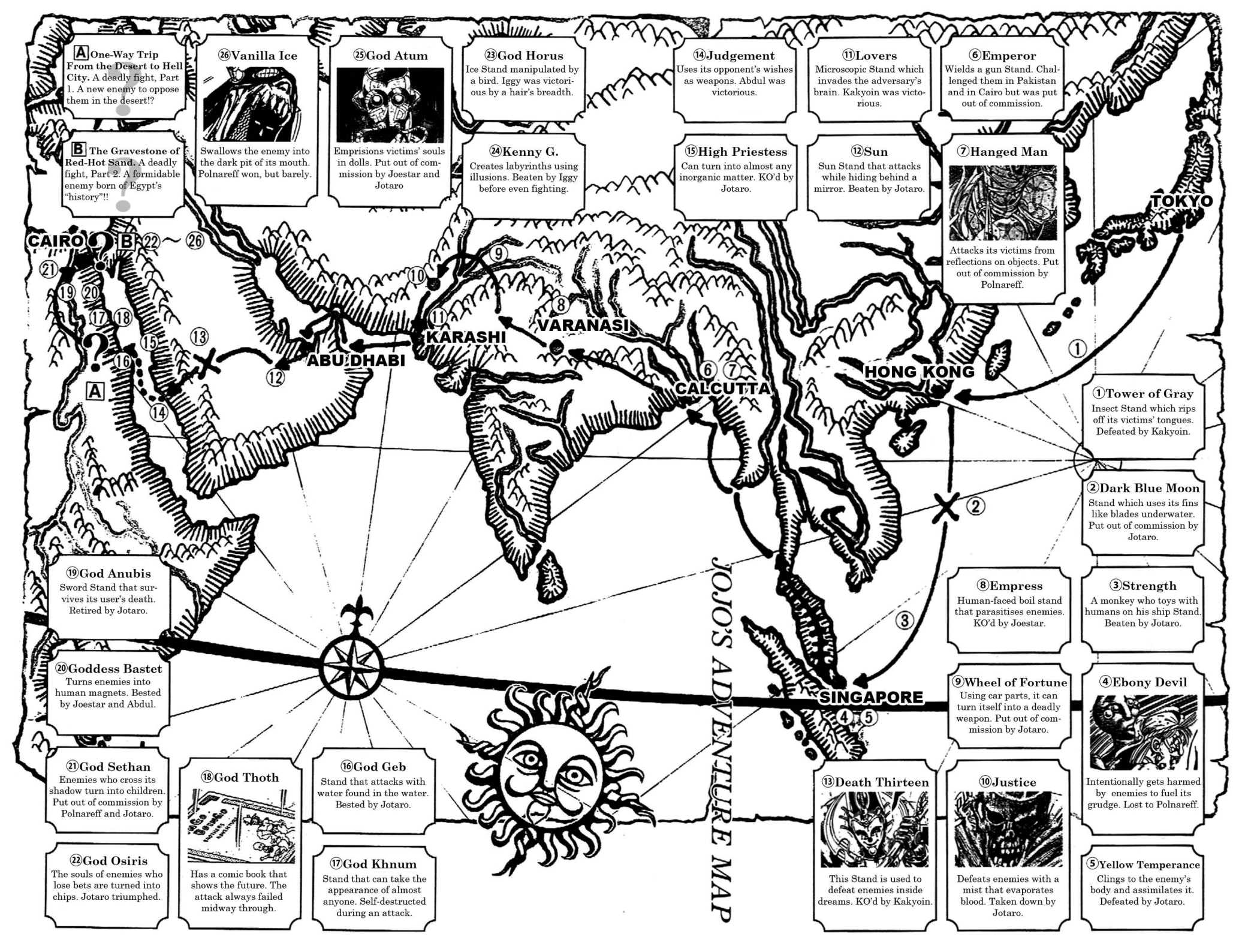
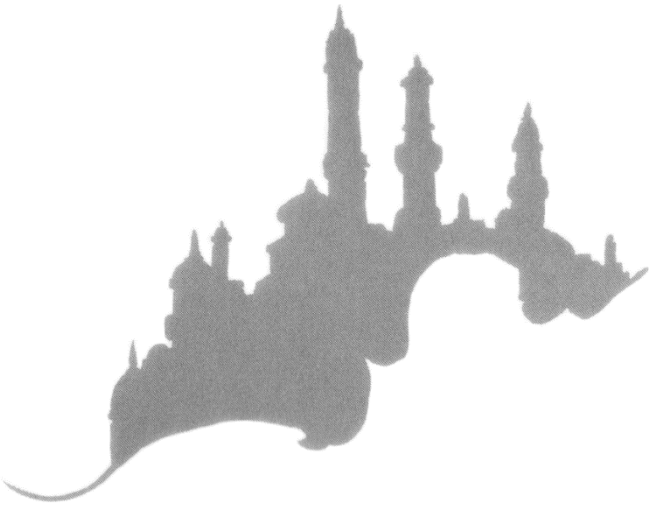

A One-Way Trip From the Desert to Hell City. A deadly fight, Part 1. A new enemy to oppose them in the desert!?
B The Gravestone of Red-Hot Sand. A deadly fight, Part 2. A formidable enemy born of Egypt's "history"!!
26 Vanilla Ice
Swallows the enemy into the dark pit of its mouth. Polnareff won, but barely.
25 God Atum
Emprisions victims' souls in dolls. Put out of commission by Joestar and Jotaro
23 God Horus
Ice Stand manipulated by a bird. Iggy was victorious by a hair's breadth.
14 Judgement
Uses its opponent's wishes as weapons. Abdul was victorious.
11 Lovers
Microscopic Stand which invades the adversary's brain. Kakyoin was victorious.
6 Emperor
Wields a gun Stand. Challenged them in Pakistan and in Cairo but was put out of commission.
24 Kenny G.
Creates labyrinths using illusions. Beaten by Iggy before even fighting.
15 High Priestess
Can turn into almost any inorganic matter. KO'd by Jotaro.
12 Sun
Sun Stand that attacks while hiding behind a mirror. Beaten by Jotaro.
7 Hanged Man
Attacks its victims from reflections on objects. Put out of commission by Polnareff.
CAIRO
TOKYO
KARASHI
VARANASI
ABU DHABI
CALCUTTA
HONG KONG
SINGAPORE
1 Tower of Gray
Insect Stand which rips off its victims' tongues. Defeated by Kakyoin.
2 Dark Blue Moon
Stand which uses its fins like blades underwater. Put out of commission by Jotaro.
19 God Anubis
Sword Stand that survives its user's death. Retired by Jotaro.
8 Empress
Human-faced boil stand that parasitises enemies. KO'd by Joestar.
3 Strength
A monkey who toys with humans on his ship Stand. Beaten by Jotaro.
20 Goddess Bastet
Turns enemies into human magnets. Bested by Joestar and Abdul.
9 Wheel of Fortune
Using car parts, it can turn itself into a deadly weapon. Put out of commission by Jotaro.
4 Ebony Devil
Intentionally gets harmed by enemies to fuel its grudge. Lost to Polnareff.
21 God Sethan
Enemies who cross its shadow turn into children. Put out of commission by Polnareff and Jotaro.
18 God Thoth
Has a comic book that shows the future. The attack always failed midway through.
16 God Geb
Stand that attacks with water found in the water. Bested by Jotaro.
13 Death Thirteen
This Stand is used to defeat enemies inside dreams. KO'd by Kakyoin.
10 Justice
Defeats enemies with a mist that evaporates blood. Taken down by Jotaro.
22 God Osiris
The souls of enemies who lose bets are turned into chips. Jotaro triumphed.
17 God Khnum
Stand that can take the appearance of almost anyone. Self-destructed during an attack.
5 Yellow Temperance
Clings to the enemy's body and assimilates it. Defeated by Jotaro.
JOJO'S ADVENTURE MAP

Towards the end of the 1800s, two young men got entangled in a battle which went down in history.
These two young men were called Jonathan Joestar and Dio Brando.
Both fell into the depths of the Atlantic Ocean and the battle seemed to come to an end.
Then, many years passed.
Dio, who had obtained immortality, stole Jonathan's body and came back to life by joining himself with it.
Dio, the dark ruler, is now secretly plotting to take over the world.
By some ironic twist of fate, it was Jonathan's descendants who sensed his resurrection and intentions.
These descendants are Joseph Joestar and Jotaro Kujo.
This novel narrates a fantastic adventure, where Jonathan's descendants, together with some trusted friends, fight to bring Dio to his defeat.



One-Way Trip From the Desert to Hell City

1

The straight horizon line divided sky and ground into two separate parts. The sky, completely clear, tended towards the black more so than blue. On the other hand, the sand, harshly white, completely covered the ground, reflecting the incandescent light. Other than this there was nothing else to be seen.

Neither a mountain, nor a river, nor an oasis, nor a cluster of bushes, nor camels with protruding ribs, and not even the tracks of desert foxes.

Naturally, nowhere were traces of human civilization to be found. And not even signs of life could be seen.

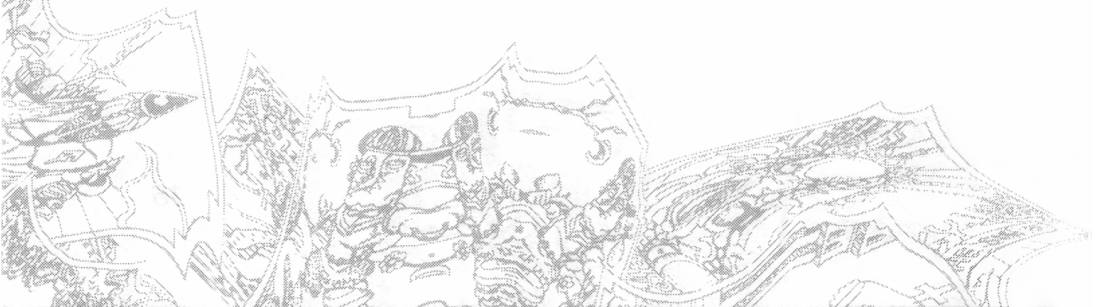
A flat ocean of sand stretching limitless and a **dark blue sky, without a cloud**… that was all there was in the desert.

An extremely monotone and desolate expanse. A dizzying nothingness, as far as the eye could see.

Like this, as if by miracle, the five men and a dog appeared on foot, in that expanse of sand. The temperature must have surely reached over 50º. The searing bodies began to weigh like lead.

The blinding sunlight which shone back from the incredibly white sand burned the eyes. The lips were awfully chapped and full of cracks, and the tongue, which had hardened like dried meat, filled the mouth with a bad taste. Here, nature did not take kindly to the men. It hadn't reached out to them as a friend. And it was clearly pitting itself against them with a certain hostility.

Otherwise they wouldn't have had to face such a difficult situation.



Both the five men and the dog were “Stand Users” and each hid within himself a special strength, inconceivable for the average human being. Even they, however, from being in the desert, found themselves nearing exhaustion.

Truth be told, that journey on foot was deadly and went far beyond any torture a man could think of. Be it on a physical level, or on a spiritual level…

– I don’t want you to think what I’m about to say is racist, but…

After having suddenly started in such a pompous way, Jean Pierre Polnareff threw a glance at Jotaro Kujo. On his dry lips hovered a mischievous smile.

– Honestly, Jotaro and Kakyoin, I envy you Japanese! Joestar and I have a fair complexion and because of it have higher chances of getting skin cancer by being exposed to the sun, and all because our epidermis has less melanin pigments!

In clear contrast with that stately debut, the voice of Polnareff – a French young man which made an impression due to his straight silver hair styled in a punk-rock manner and his typically Caucasian lean body – sounded terribly hoarse, enough to make it not seem gallant at all. Breathing hot air for hours on end, his voice had changed because of his parched throat. It was an effect of the “infernal heatwave”.

There was no doubt, just from looking at them, that his companions too – Jotaro Kujo, Joseph Joestar, Noriaki Kakyoin, and Mohammed Abdul – would speak with the same hoarse voice the moment they opened their mouths.

The water remaining at the bottom of the aluminium bottle was worth more than pure gold for them in weight. Each of them had drunk a gulp of it the day before, more or less at that same hour. Since then, not even a single drop of what you could call water had entered their bodies.

– Shit! What’s happening to this funky-boy? The beautiful voice I was so proud of is now ruined. I could reach the third octave… You have no idea how many

women have cried, in the cafés of Paris, hearing my chansons! I've no choice: from tomorrow on I will have to become a soul singer. Of course, as long as there is a tomorrow… Anyway, it's hellishly hot. Now, Jotaro, would you eat a nice Haägen Dazs ice-cream?

Yare yare, for being a soul singer he certainly isn't missing on the rambling.

Jotaro wiped his brow, but what his fingers found was not droplets, but rather sweat in a solid state, that is, rough salt crystals. It had been a long time since he'd sweated. There was no more water left in his body that could be turned into sweat, and his movement had been a kind of reflex, conditioned from past experiences where he actually sweated when it was hot.

– My high school teacher was a diehard naturalist…

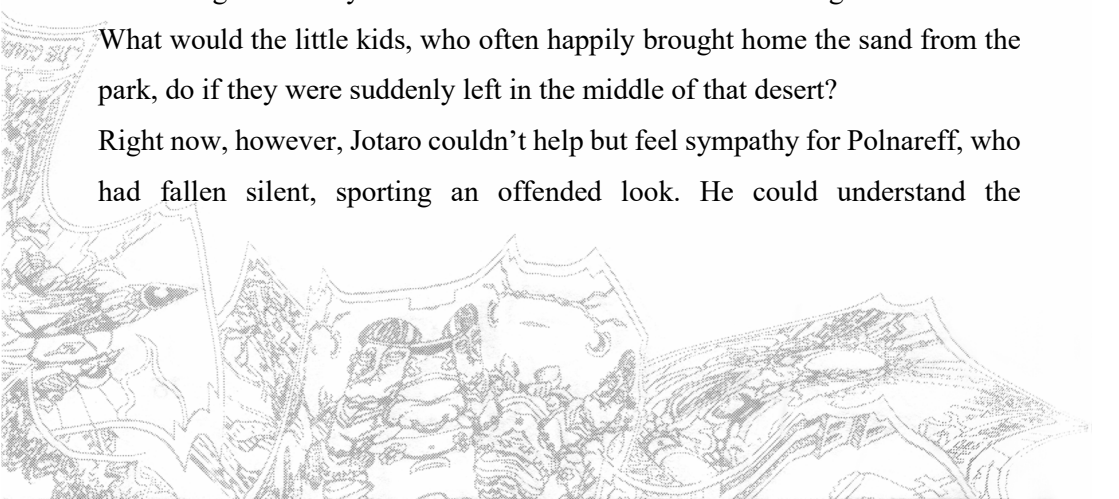
Polnareff kept talking with his hoarse voice.

– He always said this quote, like it was his stock phrase: «For the creatures of the earth, the sun is a merciful god. If the sunlight was gone no plant and no animal could live». I'd really want to drag him out here now. The tip of my nose is burnt. If that arrogant impostor were here, he'd think twice before saying nonsense!

– Don't talk too much, Polnareff! You'll waste energy.

The low hoarse voice of Joestar quelled Polnareff's incessant chatter. Still, Jotaro laughed bitterly. He also had more or less the same thought as Polnareff. What would the little kids, who often happily brought home the sand from the park, do if they were suddenly left in the middle of that desert?

Right now, however, Jotaro couldn't help but feel sympathy for Polnareff, who had fallen silent, sporting an offended look. He could understand the



Frenchman's mood almost too well. They had to think, to think of anything. Even some nonsense would have been good. They needed to have the mind active and keep thinking. To stop thinking in that desert would be tantamount to death. If the spirit surrendered, then there was no hope even if the body lived. Polnareff became aware of it and was bravely putting it to practice, as probably did all the people who had found themselves in trouble in the desert in the past. The difference between Jotaro and Polnareff was that one said what he was thinking, while the other did not.

Jotaro once again looked at that dear and friendly warrior who loved chatting so much. He noticed then, for the first time, three days after the incident, that he wore clothes quite unsuited for crossing the desert. His muscled torso was covered only by a tank top. He was essentially almost naked.

The skin on his shoulders and chest was puffed up and inflamed, and even if he didn't get cancer, he'd still be left with permanent marks on that white skin.

– Yare yare daze.

Jotaro let out a small sigh. Now that he had noticed, he had to do something. Joestar, who walked shoulder to shoulder with Polnareff, was dressed in military garb with ochre yellow jacket and trousers, as well as a soft hat of the same colour. There was no need to worry about the sun burning him. That English-blooded American with hooked nose and big eyes in constant movement, who wore on his lower face a shaggy beard, was Jotaro's grandfather. He must have passed his fifties long ago, but with his toned imposing build he emanated a life energy no lesser than that of Jotaro and Polnareff. As young as one may look, if he's getting on in years, he's getting on in years. He certainly could not be asked to take off his jacket to hand over to the Frenchman. Besides, like Polnareff, Joestar **also had the handicap of being white**.

Come to think of it, there was Abdul. He was Egyptian, and as such almost immune to the desert heat. From within an angular face, the penetrating gaze cast ascetic flames. The black hair braided into dozens of short buns and the auburn skin made him an outstanding lord of the desert. If it were up to him, he would have promptly accepted Jotaro's request and lent Polnareff a dress white enough to prevent a single sunray from entering. But in the last three days he had walked with Kakyoin on his shoulders, who was devoid of sight due to an encounter with an enemy Stand User. You couldn't ask him for that as well… And you couldn't even deprive Kakyoin of his school uniform, since he was gravely wounded.

This was what Jotaro was mulling over. *I suppose I'll end up lending him my school uniform. If I'm not mistaken, it was Polnareff himself who took off that outrageously ugly traditional clothing when he saw my uniform…* The desert, did it bring out the good side of him?

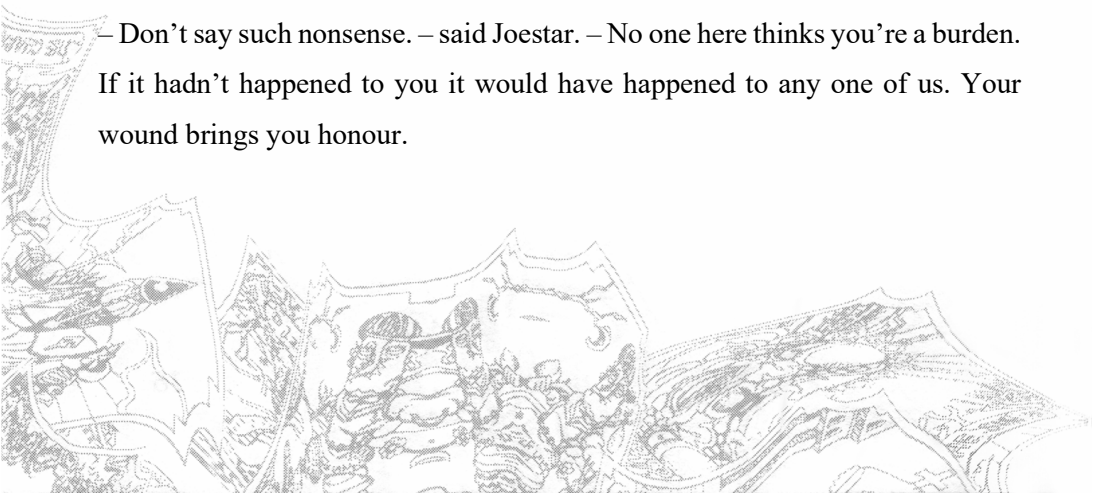
– Uh, uugh… – Kakyoin faintly groaned at Abdul's ear.

– You hurt, eh, Kakyoin? – asked Abdul, stopping.

– No, it's nothing. – A lie. Kakyoin was lying. The wounds which dug deeply through his eyelids in diagonals were no small thing and they had to be hurting quite a lot.

– I'm sorry Mr Joestar, I've become a burden.

– Don't say such nonsense. – said Joestar. – No one here thinks you're a burden. If it hadn't happened to you it would have happened to any one of us. Your wound brings you honour.



– Wouldn't it be better to rest a while? – Abdul took a quick glance at Kakyoin's face.

– No. Resting will lead to nothing. It's best to keep going as long as we can still walk. We'll rest later.

Kakyoin's face, on which the eyes matched well with his thin lips, was so pale it seemed almost transparent. His slender body kept shaking, and the boy struggled to even keep standing.

– Soon we'll have to treat his wounds. The infection will get worse!

– Mr Joestar… – Kakyoin let a bitter smile spread on his cruelly wounded countenance. – I wish you would drop it for a bit. I can handle the sun and the pain from the injuries well. But still, thanks.

– I understand how you feel.

– The truth is the medicine hurts.

– Be patient, Kakyoin.

Joestar made Kakyoin sit and drew a small bottle of whisky from his trouser pocket.

– You're at a critical time. You could stay blind forever or get your sight back. Put it like this, the pain of today will be the joy of tomorrow.

From what country came that saying?

Jotaro turned his face away from Kakyoin.

They were pouring the whisky directly over his wounded eyelids. A brutal treatment. He understood well why Kakyoin was reluctant to get treated. Hearing Kakyoin's sounds of pain behind him, Jotaro took off the uniform that reached down to his knees and casually tossed it at Polnareff.

– Jotaro? – Polnareff stared at Jotaro, incredulous.

– Shut it and put it on – came Jotaro's brusque reply, – I can stand the sun better than you.

– But…

– Come on, use mine. Apologies, I hadn't noticed, Polnareff.

Having finished tending to Kakyoin, Abdul had started to get out of his white cloak.

– N-no, never mind. I said that as a joke, and surely not because I wanted to get you out of your clothes!

– Quit whining and being such a pain! – Jotaro yelled in anger – I've thought about it, earlier. If you don't want it I'll light a fire and burn it.

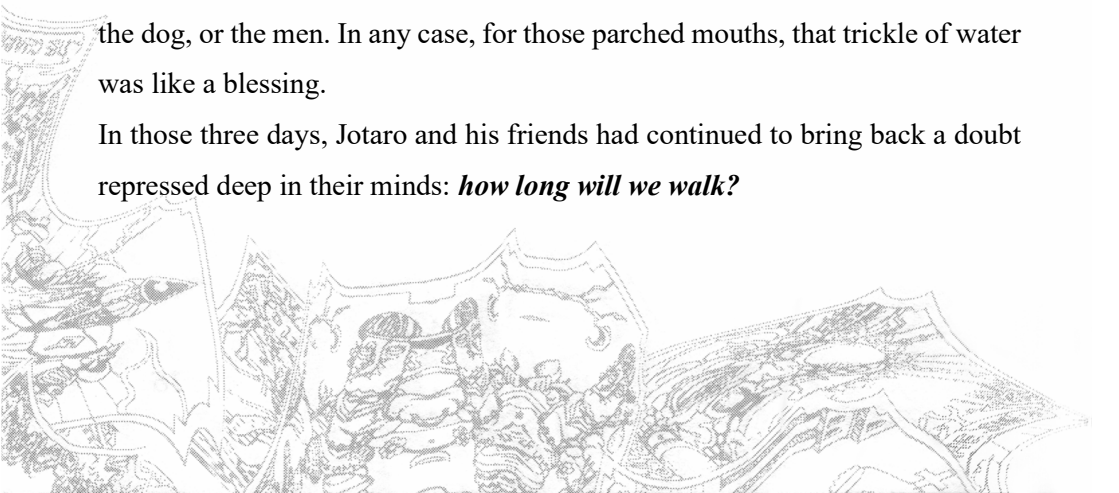
– Jotaro…

To which Polnareff, unable to answer back anymore, put on Jotaro's uniform. He stared fixedly at the sand by his feet, as if holding back the tears that would hardly come out of that dehydrated body.

The desert, had it managed to break that man?

Jotaro and the others, each in his own way, sat upon the sand and passed around the water bottle Joestar handed them. Kakyoin, Joestar, Polnareff, and Jotaro, in turn, drank a sip of hot water. Thanks to Iggy's participation, afterward, the bottle was emptied. That Boston Terrier, who stared wide-eyed, seemed to have a compelling need for water, much more than the men. This was because he was covered in a thick coat of black and white piebald fur. But that amount of water was not enough to hydrate those bodies akin to dried up sponges, be it the dog, or the men. In any case, for those parched mouths, that trickle of water was like a blessing.

In those three days, Jotaro and his friends had continued to bring back a doubt repressed deep in their minds: ***how long will we walk?***



They didn't know the answer.

Having arrived in the African continent via the Red Sea, they were heading towards Aswan by land…

If it weren't for the fact that they'd been attacked by an enemy Stand User halfway there and the dune buggy had gotten destroyed, by now they would have been in a hotel in Aswan, taking a shower and drinking Ginger Ale. Kakyoin would have received proper treatment and surely been capable of seeing a roast chicken on the table.

Instead, now they hadn't the slightest clue where they were.

Surely somewhere in Nubia, in the desert of Sudan. It had been clearly marked on the map of Africa which Joestar brought with him. On the map, even for that barren desert full of sand, were marked a series of points.

Villages, sacred ruins, and oases. There certainly bubbled fresh clear water. However, with no idea of where they were, having a map wasn't of much help.

Joestar took his belongings out of his pockets and started aligning them on the sand. A torch, a clock radio, a survival knife, a Zippo lighter, a map, an empty water bottle, a dirty handkerchief, a ration of emergency food, the small whisky flask, and two lemons. That number, two, hid an indisputable mathematical certainty. Obviously the whisky had to be economised to disinfect Kakyoin's eyes.

For how long will we still walk?

We could keep going without eating or drinking. But for how long?

As if he'd guessed Jotaro's question, Joestar suddenly piped up.

– This is all we have. This is a worrying situation, even if they say a man can last nineteen hours without a drink. So, with things this way, we will have to wait until tomorrow morning for the lemons.

Jotaro and the others nodded without a word.

– For now we can handle it – Joestar, watching them with big eyes, raised his voice as if to be encouraging. – I read in a book that in the desert, when your time comes, you notice something like a bright fire in your own field of view. Only afterwards do you suffer from hallucinations. Someone coming to our rescue, your own birthplace, a caravan of nomads, an oasis… Non-existent images fabricated by the mind. And so, when you get to the point of struggling to tell apart illusion from reality, then you're done for. But we don't have any hallucinations yet.

– I see something in the distance – muttered Abdul, pointing towards the horizon. Over there, a row of large houses faintly wavered in the sunset. A hotel, a presumed skyscraper, the blank walls of a harbour for sailing boats. Nice? Cannes? Monaco? Or Acapulco? Whatever it was, it definitely looked like one of those seaside resorts that actually exist on this Earth. There, a city was. There, people were. In the café bars was cold lemon squash.

– Can I say something? – said Polnareff, turning a questioning look towards Joestar.

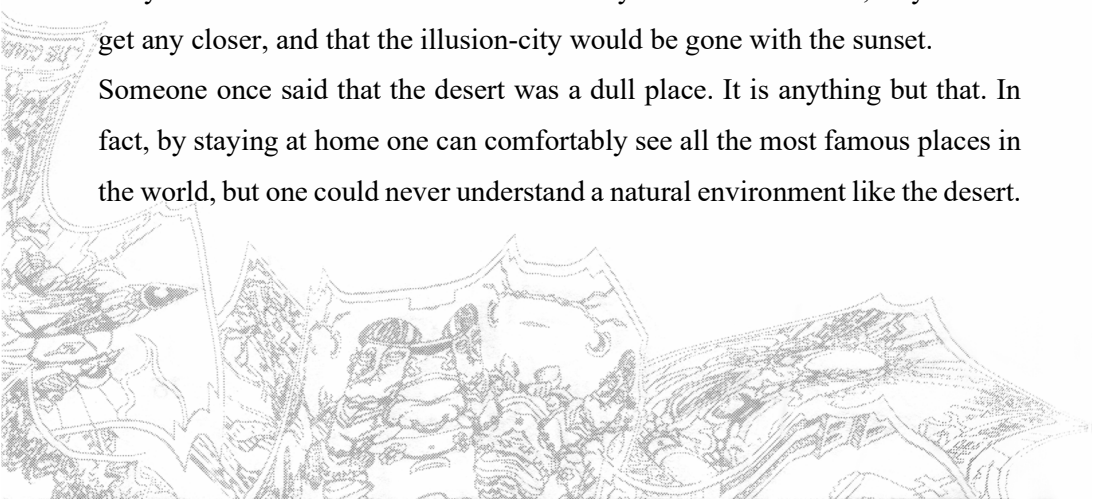
– That is surely a mirage.

– Naturally.

– Right… – Polnareff gave a depressed sigh.

They knew well that no matter how much they would have walked, they'd never get any closer, and that the illusion-city would be gone with the sunset.

Someone once said that the desert was a dull place. It is anything but that. In fact, by staying at home one can comfortably see all the most famous places in the world, but one could never understand a natural environment like the desert.



In the last three days, Jotaro and the others had seen snowy mountains, large lakes, coniferous forests, and large cities in which rose high skyscrapers.
Seeing a city and an industrialised area, signs of civilisation, in a desert with nothing to do with such realities, was a strange experience. Perhaps, in the desert, human beings and civilisations could only exist as illusions.
– It looks as real as a Hollywood movie – whispered Joestar. – It's hard to believe that something so clear and sharp isn't real. But if this isn't real, then what is?
– Let's go. We can't waste time…
Go, but where? In what direction? For how long will we keep on walking?
As if to scatter the doubts swarming him, Jotaro got up, shaking the sand from his trousers. The others mimicked him.
At that moment an incredible landscape laid before their eyes. On one side of the mirage something thin emerged. A blotch as small as a poppy seed and **even blacker than the dark cloudless sky**. **That thing** was without a doubt a mirage, or part of one. Shortly after, however, **the thing** started moving in a strange way for an illusion, and started nearing towards them. Slowly at first, almost imperceptibly, then always quickening until it reached the speed of an aircraft. Whatever **the thing** was, it appeared to wish to cross the border line that stands between the real world and that of mirages. **Was it an illusion yearning to become real?**
– Shit! Again! What will it be this time? – said Polnareff with a tense look. **The thing** was an oil tanker. An oil tanker of huge dimensions with all its cargo. It seemed impossible to Jotaro and the others that that pile of iron could fly. As a means of transport, it even looked like an airplane. Indeed, aside from shape, it was nothing like a ship.
– To the ground! – yelled Joestar.

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The flying oil tanker quickly passed by, grazing them. In the air, roughly two hundred metres above their heads, the thing dripped seawater and produced a terrible roar, piercing their ears. The sudden strong wind lifted a whirlwind of sand. The huge hull was painted red and extended through their entire field of view, even blocking the sun. Around it reigned darkness, resembling night. The oil tanker, as if mocking Jotaro and his companions who, petrified, had looked up, moved calmly past the opposite horizon. The group, lying speechless on the sand, followed the ship disappearing in the distance with their eyes.

– ...Jotaro, what was it this time?

Kakyoin's voice brought Jotaro back to his senses.

– From the noise of the wind pressure, it must have been something frighteningly huge.

– Believe me, you're lucky you didn't see it… – replied Polnareff – That an oil tanker capable of flying truly exists or not, at this point doesn't matter… The problem is that I'm no longer sure my mind is sound.

– No. The mind's got nothing to do with it. – saying this, Joestar used his hand to wipe off the drops of water that had fallen on his face. That brackish water had fallen from the ship.

– In these three days, this phenomenon has occurred every time a mirage appeared. At first I thought it was an illusion but… this water is real, that's evident! It's an alarming fact, that a hallucination manages to make us shiver.

– As I thought – said Abdul – As we see this mirage as real, **so it will become tangible and attack us.**

– Yes. Besides, to do these kinds of tricks… – Jotaro and the others didn't even wait for Joestar to finish his sentence. For them there was but one answer.

To modify reality it couldn't be anything but a Stand User. This meant that a new opponent and a new battle awaited them!

2

In the desert, the temperature difference between day and night is huge. From a boiling 50º hell during the day, it switches to a frozen hell with temperatures below zero at night. Feeling the cold sinking into him, Jotaro woke up from a light slumber. For being so tired, he was enduring the cold almost too well. However, in the case of his four companions and the dog, it seemed that exhaustion had won over the temperature. In fact, they remained sleeping soundly.

…They have a will that doesn't let up easily thought Jotaro, raising his gaze to the sky which, like a coffer whose jewels had been scattered about, sparkled full of bright stars.

The previous day, after the oil tanker, a fuel tank truck and a medieval European castle had flown over their heads. At sunset the mirages were gone, but these were real things, given that the detaching bricks from the castle walls had almost crushed their heads.

If it was the work of a Stand User targeting their lives, this conduct wouldn't make sense. Why hadn't he made the oil tanker or the tank truck fall on top of them? Why had he made it simply fly overhead them?

Maybe he had complete confidence in his Stand's capabilities and had only wanted to show them his power. But still… before a fight, to openly show off what you're capable of, it certainly can't be called a smart move.

However, one thing was sure: it had caused noticeable psychological harm in Jotaro's group.

An oil tanker and a medieval castle that flew in the sky… They were at their limit, starving, parched, and wandered hopelessly, unable to find a way out… If they had been normal people, they would have surely gone crazy. Strangely though, Jotaro felt no fear or apprehension at all. Maybe because he'd always been immune to fear? Maybe because his companions were always with him? Or maybe because the days of brutal encounters with enemy Stand Users were distant and their courage had unconsciously grown? Each of these speculations could be true.

Up until three months earlier, Jotaro was a high school student living peacefully in Japan. And he was the same who now, after many bloody conflicts, wandered aimlessly in the Nubian desert, in Sudan, far from his country. He had a different physique from the other Japanese, he was of a sturdy build. His countenance was fearless and his eyes bluish and full of audacity. This young man couldn't help but think about his strange fate.

Indeed, it all started three months ago.

Three months ago, when he found out he had developed a Stand, was when it all began.

Stand. This was the name with which Joestar had called a manifestation gifted with strength and born out of a person's vital energy. A special capability, limited to a small selection of animals and people, and that was enough to explain this so-called "superior power".

For example, there are people capable of lifting a television right in front of them without using their hands, by using this "superior power". Could it be telekinesis? Could it be that **something invisible to ordinary people** comes out of their body and then **that something** lifts the television?

It's a daring hypothesis. However, at least those who use Stands tend to believe that explanation. Because, for them, **that something** can actually be seen. A Stand can take the form of a human being, an animal, a plant, or any other object.

Those who control a Stand freely and with their mind are called "Stand Users", and are individuals who generally guide humanity towards the future. Evolution has gifted men two hands, as precise as machines, which allowed them to best the other animals. In the same way, these people will reinvent a new culture and a new civilisation, and will become the undisputed rulers of the world. Naturally, it all depends on the use that the User makes of it, given that possessing a Stand equates to having three hands.

But Jotaro, who was but an ordinary high school student, perceived his Stand to be an "evil spirit". Other than thinking he was possessed by an "evil spirit" invisible to others, Jotaro couldn't explain the true nature of his Stand.

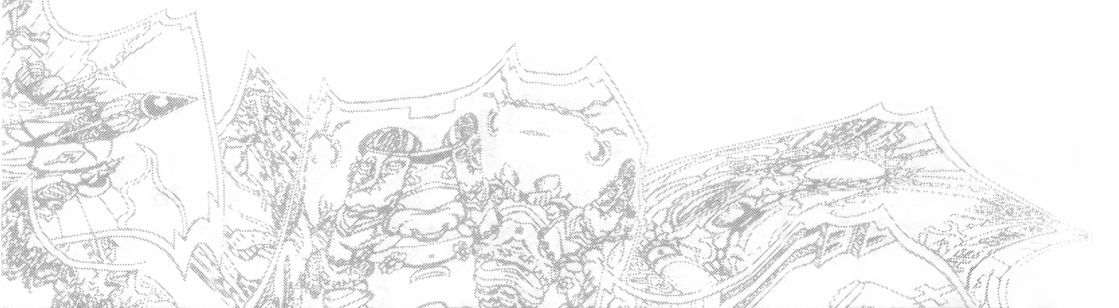
Grandfather Joestar and his younger friend Abdul were the Stand Users who had saved Jotaro. Even he was convinced (especially because of his grandfather) that those possessing this "evil spirit" could be precious help.

However, Jotaro's resentfulness hadn't faded away, not even after receiving a lecture on Stands from those two individuals.

Why did this Stand power manifest out of the blue?

Joestar had given a clear answer to this question.

– Dio Brando is the incarnation of evil… That bastard brought my grandfather Jonathan Joestar's body back to life and is using it!



Jotaro remembered perfectly, even now, Joestar's indignation at that moment. His fists trembled and the veins that became visible on his temples made his face resemble the deformed one of a demon…

A hundred years ago, Joestar's grandfather, Jonathan, had sacrificed his life to the heavens to kill Dio Brando once and for all. He had blown up the ship he was on and had slowly sunk into the depths of the ocean alongside Dio. Of this latter one, only the head was left intact.

Dio is, and at the same time is *not* a human being. Even if you do kill him he won't die: he's a vampire, he's eternally young. Even if Jonathan had ended him, he would have still remained on this earth.

Thus Dio had remained alive at the bottom of the sea, had removed Jonathan's head from his body, and attached his own to it.

Then, four years ago, taking advantage of a treasure finding ship, he ended up returning by chance, coming back to land after over a hundred years.

Dio's resurrection was in some way bound to the fate of the Joestar family.

– You and Dio are connected by an invisible thread, and Dio's resurrection can be interpreted as the wake-up call for the Stand power sleeping within you. Of course, Dio also possesses a very powerful Stand, but both of you could become rulers of the world, I'm sure of it… – this was what Abdul said of that bizarre matter.

– I would like to think of it this way… – added Joestar. – My grandfather's body, won't it be calling out for his descendants? The Stand power that manifests within us has the single purpose of defeating Dio and obtaining eternal rest for the body… To take down a Stand with only the power of a Stand… If the Stand gets injured, the body hosting it will also be affected physically. Overcoming Dio depends only on our Stands.

And so, the war between the Joestar line and Dio was reignited after a hundred years.

Naturally Jotaro tried to connect the words of Joestar and Abdul to the reality of the situation. He was still not convinced of having any connection to Dio Brando. Even if it existed, according to what Joestar said, **why must he fight him**...?

And sure enough, shortly after, Jotaro found himself **having to fight** with all his might.

It was Joestar's daughter, Holly, Jotaro's mother.

Suddenly a Stand had materialised and taken hold of her without even giving her the chance to challenge Dio's malice.

A Stand is led by the strength of spirit of the one possessing it. Fighting instinct is what moves it. And Holly, who was a peaceful person, was unable to resist it and her body ended up seized by it, slowly wasting away.

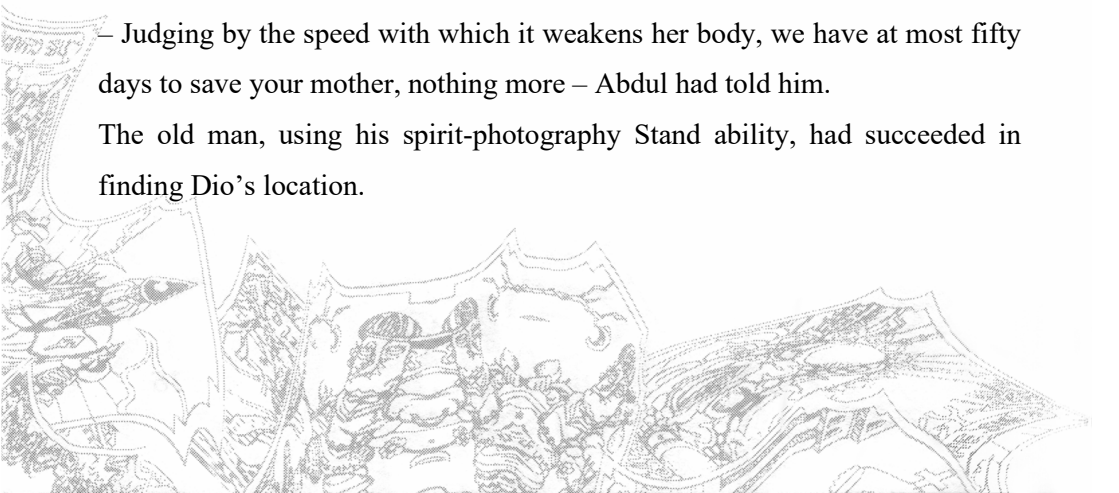
Jotaro loved Holly, but due to his teenage shyness he'd never been able to tell her. He really loved that lively and beautiful mother.

Yes. That was it. That's why I left on this trip.

All to save mum. Find Dio, kill him, and break the curse. If Dio were defeated, the fate that bound him to the Joestar legacy would be ended, and the Stand draining Jotaro's mother neutralised.

– Judging by the speed with which it weakens her body, we have at most fifty days to save your mother, nothing more – Abdul had told him.

The old man, using his spirit-photography Stand ability, had succeeded in finding Dio's location.



There's no time to lose. The first thing to do is ***reach Cairo, Egypt, within fifty days and then kill Dio, who's hiding somewhere within the city. To save my mother.***

Of course, Dio, tied to us by some invisible thread, is already aware of the ensuing events. With his Stand power he knows all of our movements in advance, and to kill us he's sent, one after the other, the most ruthless Stand Users.

Their plane had fallen, their ship had sunk. They had managed to continue by land, but danger awaited them in every city. They were constantly harmed, but had never resigned themselves to death.

In order to win, Abdul found himself between life and death, suffering serious injuries. Kakyoin, who had his eyes wounded by a Stand during a fight, risked losing his sight.

Still, after so many deadly fights we're surely getting stronger. There was no choice, we wouldn't have lived to this day if we hadn't. So far the enemy Users have been formidable Stand Masters.

One had to stay vigilant.

Both Kakyoin and Polnareff were originally assassins sent by Dio. Only after the "flesh buds" hidden in their brains were removed (with the help of a Stand, of course) did they offer to be part of this mission to wage war on Dio.

The motive wasn't clear. Perhaps, after the brainwashing, a sense of justice was born in them? Or maybe, being aware of Dio's existence, they feared his power?

In any case, before leaving Japan, Kakyoin had said this to Abdul:

– Jotaro's mother, Mrs Holly, is someone capable of warming the hearts of others. Just by being near her you feel at ease. I say this because that's the kind of person I wish to fall in love with. I want to protect her, I want to see her healthy and make her smile return to her lively face.

If Abdul isn't misremembering things, I should express my gratitude to Kakyoin.

Indeed, I left on this quest to save my mother.

Right now I'm overwhelmed by the dangers of the desert and tortured by excruciating pain, like I'm being split apart. But I haven't let myself give in to panic and I'm still alive without going crazy. All of this because it's the only way to save my mother.

It's been a month since leaving Japan, and even now, at this very moment, her body is wasting away under a strange plant-like Stand. She's climbing a ladder that leads her, step by step, to death.

We're victims of the desert. Victims needing to be rescued. ***But the real victim is my mother. She's the actual victim, counting on our help. No one besides us can save her.***

That's why I can't allow myself to fail. No matter how many injuries I receive, I won't allow myself to die.

No matter what kind of Stand blocks our path, I'll surely destroy them.

Destroy them, destroy them, I'll keep bringing them down, and I'll rip off Dio's throat without fail…!

During an afternoon four days after the incident, the desert tried to inflict the killing blow on its victims.

Jotaro and his companions, who wandered under continuous pursuit by **mirages that became real**, ended up besieged by a sandstorm. In the desert

there's nowhere to hide and the raging wind, combined with sand, delivered the coup de grâce upon the helpless party.

Countless grains of sand whipped them like slaves, and their bodies were now defenceless. Between a whimper and another, the sand managed to relentlessly enter their mouths and eyes, completely removing their ability to see. For a couple meters they could still manage to make out the backs of one another, as they continued on their way. However both the blue sky and the incandescent sun were invisible and shrouded by the haze of sand.

By now they were at their limit, the party couldn't even feel the pain caused by the sand that clung to their feet. Nothing, however, when compared to the torment caused by countless grains on their bodies…

– Hey! – yelled Polnareff – Are you kidding me? This is like being stuck in the middle of a machine gun barrage. And with the machine gun being an automatic rifle, we can barely survive.

Polnareff took out a chewing-gum from the pocket and offered it to Iggy, who walked hiding behind Jotaro.

– Hey, Iggy, try to intervene. Isn't your Stand a "sand" Stand? There shouldn't be a problem. Come on, don't be shy, eat. Here, it's your favourite gum, the coffee flavoured one. How's that, hein?

But the dog, unable to harbour feelings of respect or love, threw a glance at the chewing-gum and, after sniffing it, snorted and turned his back on him.

– Aaargh! This bastard! Don't you see that your companion needs help!? Do you have no feelings!? You really are a dog!

– It's useless, Polnareff – Jotaro cut off his friend, who was stomping his feet in anger. – Do you really think Iggy will take pity on you? That he'll protect you?

– Tsk… worthless dog!

Polnareff threw him a kick in anger, but Iggy dodged it without concern, hiding this time in Abdul's shadow. The Frenchman, who lost his balance and fell on his face, seemed to have inhaled grains of sand, and started a sneezing fit.

The rest were not very inclined to help back on his feet a man who'd gotten into an involuntary comedy sketch with a dog. They kept walking in silence, leaving Polnareff behind.

– Come on, wait for me! Hey, Jotaro! Mr Joestar!

He quickly got up and followed the trail of his companions.

In that moment, they all noticed something. The wind blowing against their bodies suddenly turned weak and indiscernible. This is not to say however that the impetus of the storm lost strength.

They still hadn't the faintest idea of where they were. They couldn't make out neither the sky nor the sun. Jotaro and his friends were in the midst of all this. Then why did the wind gusts die down now? It was an inexplicable change, but it hinted at what direction it originated from. In other words, the wind which had been assaulting them from the front began to blow in an arc on both sides, as if to avoid Jotaro and the others.

– What… What is it that's rising in front of us? It's something huge…

Deprived of sight, Kakyoin solved the enigma without hesitation.

– But of course! – agreed Joestar, – The wind is blowing like it meets with something and gets pushed around it. If it's a rock, we could take shelter from the wind and rest. But we shouldn't consider ourselves lucky just yet.

– In these circumstances, I don't think there's anything else we can do.

Paying no mind to what Polnareff said, Jotaro and the others continued to press on cautiously. From the other side of the curtain of sand emerged a long and straight shadow. What led to the change in the wind current had been something that had acted as a shield.

– What?!

The group halted unconsciously.

That was not a rock.

It was a diesel locomotive.

3

There's no law that establishes that a locomotive should not be found in the desert.

But a diesel locomotive, suddenly appearing right in the middle of a sandstorm, wasn't really the kind of thing that fit in with the surrounding scenery. The combination of sand, which we could safely call a natural phenomenon, and a diesel locomotive, one of the crown jewels of modern civilisation, gave Jotaro's group the feeling that something was strangely mismatched and forced.

– I'm amazed… Finding a locomotive in the middle of this desert is absurd to say the least…

The diesel locomotive sported on its orange side the initials SK[1] in white, probably a logo. Looking up at the locomotive, Jotaro had let his thoughts slip out.

– Yes – Abdul nodded in agreement – It's really a strange sight. Like it's discordant, out of place...

[1] T.N.: Satanic Koupler?

A deep loud noise, like the growl of a dog, pierced through the air. It was that of an idling engine.

– It's working! The engine is on! It's not a pile of scrap, it arrived here on its own!

As if in answer to Joestar's exclamation, the diesel locomotive turned on both the headlights and the interior lights. The blinding light of the headlights diffused in the air, amplifying the irregular glittering of the swirling grains of sand. The tracks, hidden in the sand, faintly emerged in the light.

Jotaro took a look to see who was at the driver's cabin, but it truly seemed like it had stopped without anyone driving it. It was hard to see, a veil of sand obstructed their vision, but far away he could make out the silhouettes of two people.

– What do we do Mr Joestar? Should we go up and take a look? – with this question from Abdul, Polnareff's expression changed and Joestar replied hurriedly:

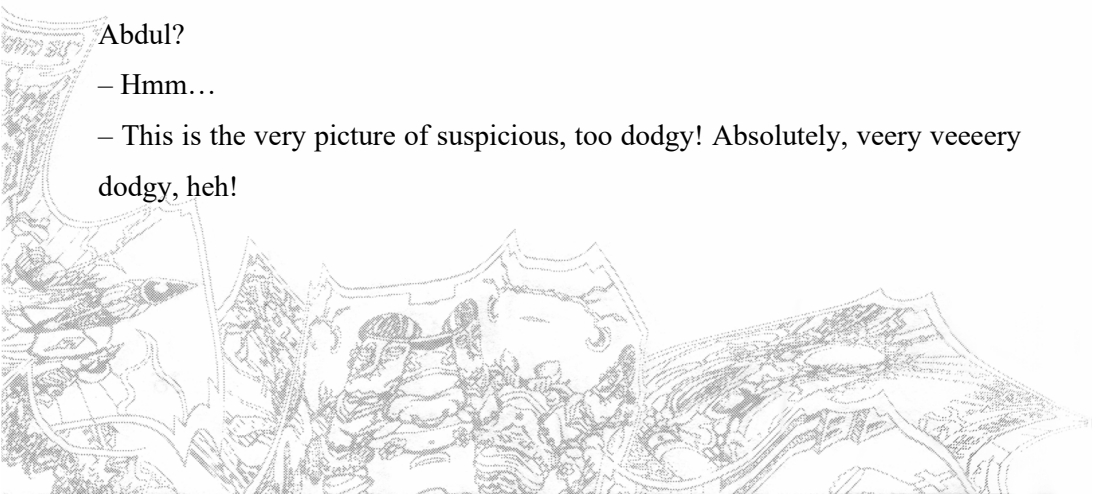
– Tell me you're joking! Abdul, you speak without thinking!

– What's the matter?

– I'm not convinced! It could have been a Stand User who turned this mirage **into a reality**. It was the same for the oil tanker and the tank truck, don't you agree? I've never heard of a railroad in the Nubian desert. What about you, Abdul?

– Hmm…

– This is the very picture of suspicious, too dodgy! Absolutely, veery veeeery dodgy, heh!



Polnareff kept insisting, sending spit flying left and right, but Abdul replied with the utmost calm.

– On the other hand, about the physical mirages, they vanished at sunset, and we didn't see one. In other words, without an actual mirage, it wouldn't be possible to have a concretised mirage.

– Then, what are you getting at?

– Take a look around. In this sandstorm there's no mirage to be seen. Cakes and biscuits can't be made without their ingredients.

– The Stand User's power isn't limited to just inside the sandstorm, but it's also acting, unaffected, outside of it.

– But how is that possible? Besides some exceptions, a Stand usually only works near its User. Not to mention the fact that to know our location he must surely be outside of the storm. Otherwise, with the locomotive right in front of us and the reduced visibility, it's impossible.

– You know what they say… everything's possible! – Polnareff countered, waving both his arms like a bird. – Well, I… I find it a bit unlikely that we stumbled across a locomotive in the middle of an endless desert. It's a one in a thousand possibility, rather, one in a billion. Basically, don't you find it quite strange that in these circumstances, in front of desperate people like us, real help would appear?

– Would you say it's a trap?

– Aren't you jumping to conclusions?

Joestar, who had been listening quietly to the exchange between the duo so far, suddenly opened his mouth.

– Come on, Polnareff… maybe it could be that lady luck has finally come to our aid with a private train!

– A private train? This!?

– Well, you know, oil is the wealth of today and tomorrow, and it may even be that a megalomaniac built himself a railroad to kill time and for his own gain. Similar things can be seen now in Africa… Besides, in the Near and Middle East the thing is starting to go through a boom.

– Really… it makes no sense! Don't you think that's a bit too optimistic?

– It was a mere observation, I don't want to downright contradict you – Joestar said, furrowing his brow unintentionally. – However that's not the point. We have no choice. The last lemon was eaten this morning, and our provisions are running out. If we keep wandering the desert like this, by the end of two days we'll surely meet our **death**. Besides, Kakyoin's eye injury is getting worse: there's no choice, we should take that train, even if it must be a trap.

– Hmm…

Joestar's speeches always had an incredible persuasive force.

– Jotaro, what do you think? – said a perplexed Polnareff, passing the ball to his companion.

– …It was the old man who first used the word **death**. – was Jotaro's brash reply.

– Okay, the situation is dire. There's a thirty percent chance this is a trap and seventy percent that it isn't.

– Sure, but there's always that thirty percent. In a normal situation we would never do it. – said a resigned looking Polnareff.

They turned their gazes towards the diesel locomotive once again.

That feeling of incongruity which they had already felt before took over again.

The shape of that diesel locomotive was truly abnormal. A normal locomotive, be it a steam, electrical, or diesel one, always tows a carriage which people can get on. The one they had before them, instead, acted as both. In other words, the front half was used as a locomotive and the back as a carriage.

– I've travelled on a myriad of trains all over the world, and yet I've never seen a locomotive of this kind. It's certainly equipped with a diesel engine but…

– But how do you know that? – Abdul said, turning to Joestar.

– You only need to look at the top. There's no pantograph. The engine must be equipped with an electricity generator, but it shows no signs of life. Sure, it should be admitted though that the front resembles the DP35 from EMD.[2]

– DP35?

– Yes, it's a locomotive that was in production from 1963 to 1966, one of the many achievements of American industry. It became a great success because of its peculiar shape. Its utility was beyond comparison and its success led to massive exports. Even today it holds an important role all over the world.

– Aah... You're quite well acquainted with locomotives.

– Honestly, I don't dislike them.

– Do you intend to keep talking about this? – Jotaro's annoyed tone cut into the conversation. – Let's just go once and for all. We don't know where it'll take us but we'll leave this sandstorm behind, sooner or later.

If the doors didn't open he'd just tear them apart with his stand... The moment Jotaro set foot on the step carved on the side of the train, Polnareff yelled, pointing at the door.

– Look, there!

[2] T.N.: There's no DP35 by Electro-Motive Diesel but Joseph's description matches their GP35.

On the LED message panel installed on the surface of the door appeared flashing letters.

[WHERE ARE YOU HEADED?]

– English…? – mumbled Joestar.

– To Aswan – Abdul replied.

[UNFORTUNATELY, THIS TRAIN DOES NOT GO THROUGH ASWAN. HOWEVER, AT THE LAST STOP, HELL CITY, YOU WILL BE CONNECTED TO AN EXPRESS TRAIN BOUND FOR ASWAN.]

On their own those flashing red letters were abstract, impersonal, and very unlikely. However, the meaning of those sentences resurfaced a faint hope that Jotaro and his companions hadn't felt in some time. Maybe it really was help, but it could also be a complete lie.

– Come on, let's get on! – called Jotaro, turning his gaze towards the driver's cabin.

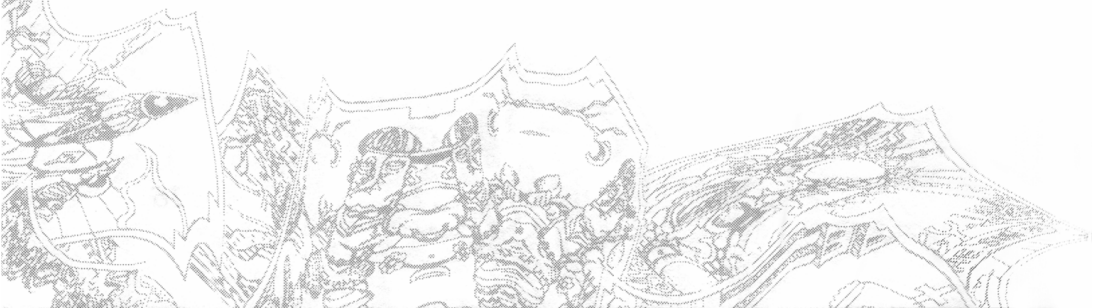
He shoved and the door slowly opened, releasing a rush of compressed air. One by one, once getting on the step, Jotaro and his friends got into the train.

Just like how it had opened, the door suddenly closed.

At the signal of a frenzied steam siren, the diesel locomotive, with a jolt, started to slowly leave.

The whole group took their places on rough wooden benches set by the windows.

The train gradually gained speed, and, disregarding the sandstorm, it pressed on into the desert.



The tempest continued raging on outside the windows and now, for them, there was only the unknown. They were not worried, but simply relieved to have escaped such a storm.

Jotaro, finally reassured, started to inspect the inside of the carriage in search of something suspicious. He raised his head again, caught by the same sensation of mismatch as before.

Wooden boards covered the floor and walls. The windows were sash. The shiny black ceiling had a ceiling fan installed, now decrepit, an antique chandelier, and an old-fashioned loudspeaker shaped like a trumpet. All this reminded the style of the years preceding the Second World War, by which the train should undoubtedly be from the 30s.

Yet according to what Joestar claimed, the "locomotive" dated back to the 60s, while the message panel clearly belonged to the technology of the 80s.

That train packed full of contradictions between old and new and the obvious imbalance of it all arose a vague sense of uneasiness in Jotaro.

The ceiling fan, almost as if mocking Jotaro's growing anxiety, started slowly stirring a fetid and suffocating air.

– It's punishment for having been so demanding – said Polnareff with a disgusted look – And besides, what's with this suffocating air? I can't bear with this either.

– My god… So hot… This stench… – Joestar said, shifting in his place nonstop.

– I've been feeling strange vibrations from below for a while. Is it because of the dampers? If it's from the air valves, it would be real trouble.

– Bah, given it's a train this old, it pays to expect the impossible.

– Okay, but the herniated disk I suffered as a young man could return...

Neither of the two was able to finish his own sentence. A breeze of cool air caressed everyone's cheeks.

The air conditioning system had opened its outlets and a cooling and refreshing air started dispersing.

At the same time, the stagnant air was vented out, and the violent shaking of the carriage stopped, as if it had been replaced with a new one.

– Hey, but was a ventilation system ever there before? – said Polnareff, looking at the ceiling with an alarmed air.

– Surely, sir!

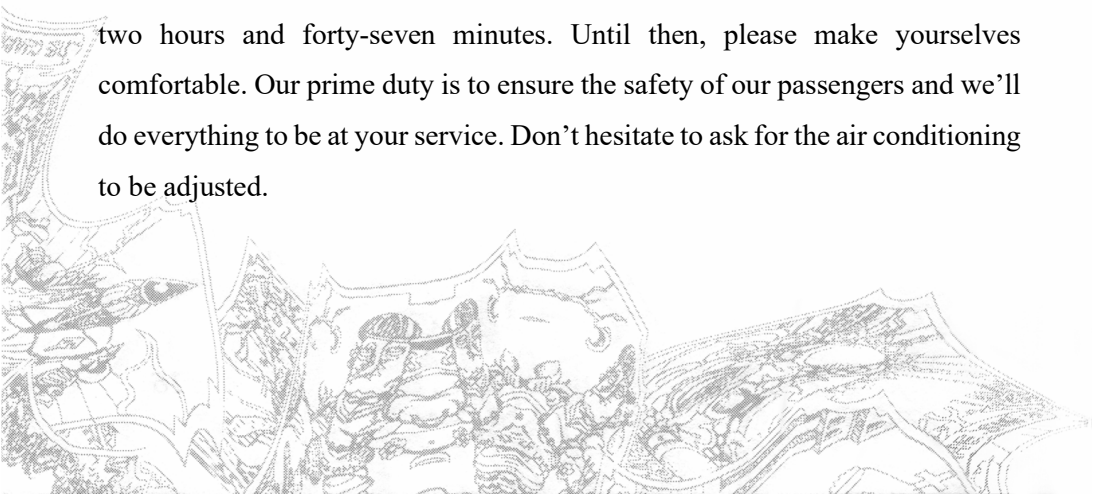
Who had answered was neither Jotaro nor any of the others, but a masculine voice broadcast by the trumpet loudspeaker.

The group instantly got up on reflex and tried to assess the situation. Still the voice pouring from the speaker kept expressing itself in an excessively educated and professional way.

– Greetings, allow me to welcome you aboard the Satanic Coupler, my sincerest thanks. Let me introduce myself: I'm the train driver and my name is Absalom. I shall take care of all of you until the end of the journey. I'm at your disposal for any request you might have.

That announcement in a courteous and hesitant English leaked something strange about the accent, however Jotaro and the other members of the group relaxed.

– The Satanic Coupler will arrive at Hell City at 16:00 sharp, taking exactly two hours and forty-seven minutes. Until then, please make yourselves comfortable. Our prime duty is to ensure the safety of our passengers and we'll do everything to be at your service. Don't hesitate to ask for the air conditioning to be adjusted.



– The Satanic Coupler is really… an infernal machine.

Jotaro's whisper, who was starting to have enough of those announcements, caused a grimace upon Joestar's face.

– Hey, don't be rude! After all, what Absalom said helps us. You should be infinitely grateful. Don't you also think that suddenly everything's become comfortable?

– If you say so…

The man who went by the name Absalom hesitated for a moment on the other side of the loudspeaker.

– Truth be told, this morning the condition of the dampers was slightly worse, but now they have started working properly again.

– Oh, do you also sell food and beverages by the way? – Polnareff asked, rubbing his stomach while he was lying on the bench. – I remind you we are poor stragglers, so food and drink should have priority over everything.

– Food and beverages? What do you mean? – Absalom retorted in a mysterious tone.

– I think it's just normal to sell packed lunches, beer, and Coca-Cola aboard a train. Actually, while we're at it, is there also a cute hostess in miniskirt by any chance?

– Packed lunches?

– You heard that right… – replied Polnareff absentmindedly. – Don't tell me you've never heard of packed lunches. Are you saying that maybe they don't exist in Sudan? Although, France doesn't have them either… Ordinary packed lunches! This is crazy! Do I also need to explain them? They're small meal boxes that are sold at train stations or aboard trains.

– Really? It's the first time I've heard of that. – an interested Absalom muttered from the other end of the loudspeaker. – I know it's no excuse, but I remind you

that we find ourselves in a remote desert and that such metropolitan services do not exist here. From now on we will make sure to meet your every need.

– Fine, fine, we'll keep that in mind. From now on, if all's not up to par...

– Worry not, this is the first and only time such a disservice will occur, hah hah hah hah...

The announcement closed with a cheerful and amused voice.

– I forgot to ask if he was an oil nouveau riche. But then I don't think a Stand User would be honest and declare "I'm a Stand User" anyway...

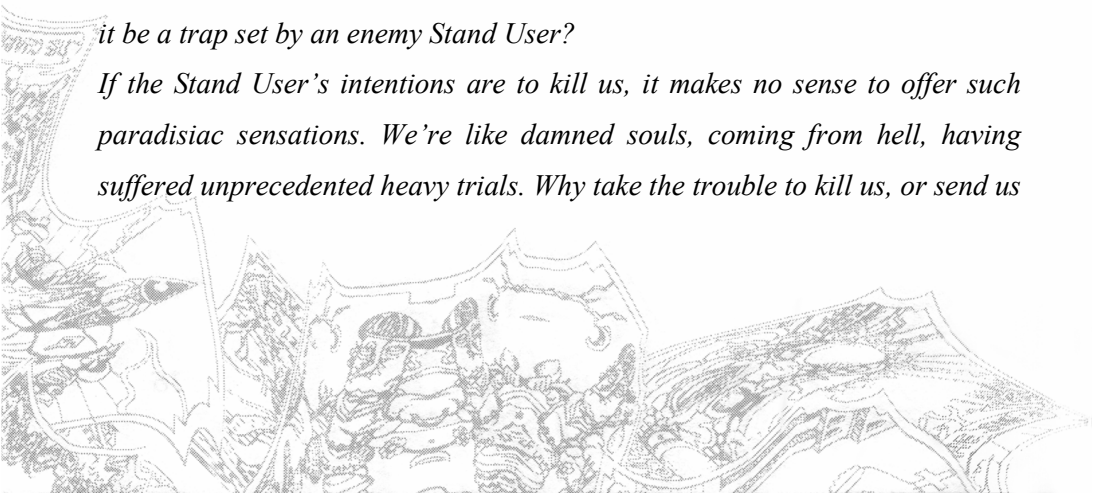
Joestar hinted a yawn and Polnareff, infected by it, opened wide his big mouth. Thanks to the air conditioning set to maximum, the carriage's temperature began to be pleasantly liveable. The cooling air that was nearly absorbed by the party's overheated bodies vaguely resembled the way water filters through the spaces of dried-up sand. There wasn't a more pleasant sensation in the world.

Right afterwards, however, from the depths of the now exhausted bodies, a powerful drowsiness took over which led to Jotaro and his companions dozing off.

The repetitive rumbling of the wheels on the rails played out like a lullaby. But it was absolutely necessary to be on guard for Absalom who, after all, was always in the diesel locomotive's driver's cabin.

From where did this cool feeling and this placid sleepiness come from? Could it be a trap set by an enemy Stand User?

If the Stand User's intentions are to kill us, it makes no sense to offer such paradisiac sensations. We're like damned souls, coming from hell, having suffered unprecedented heavy trials. Why take the trouble to kill us, or send us



a diesel locomotive? Without any intervention, by the end of two days we would have been swallowed by the desert and ceased living, suffocated by the sand. If I had been in the enemy's shoes, I would have surely adopted an infallible and safe method.

Is this very peaceful reality perhaps a trick? And the diesel locomotive, isn't it a means to remove suspicions of any connection with a Stand User?

Well, perhaps trusting him this quickly was okay. Finally the threat of the desert is being left behind for good. We have survived.

– Come on, wake up. The sandstorm seems to have finally stopped.

It had been roughly an hour, and with Kakyoin's voice, Jotaro and the rest of the group woke up together.

Kakyoin, who'd lost his eyesight, had figured out those past couple days how to interpret situations. Having learnt to rely on sounds, his sense of hearing had developed considerably, and he managed to sense that the storm had subsided by the noise the sand grains made when hitting the window glass.

It was true, the sandy wind raging outside had gradually settled. Kakyoin was slowly regaining his eyesight and had started to perceive a barren surface, softly heated by the sun.

– I'm sorry, Kakyoin – said Joestar – I dozed off. You didn't get to sleep, right? Is it still hurting?

– Yes, quite. But the last stop is just one hour away.

The last stop? wondered Jotaro.

I'm sure I heard him say Hell City. The driver named Absalom, he's got a crazy taste, calling it the Satanic Coupler, and Hell City. He's not naming fighter jets or tanks...

– We're out of it, the sandstorm's over – said Joestar.

The diesel locomotive kept hurling the desert like a bullet. The rushing current of sand that raged around them dissolved in an instant, like a broken spell. Their field of vision suddenly became clear.

In that same instant, a vast mirage was reflected in the eyes of Jotaro and his friends, becoming lost in the horizon.

– This is bad! – Jotaro yelled without thinking.

From within the mirage, its constituent **pieces** emerged one after the other.

– It's getting closer!

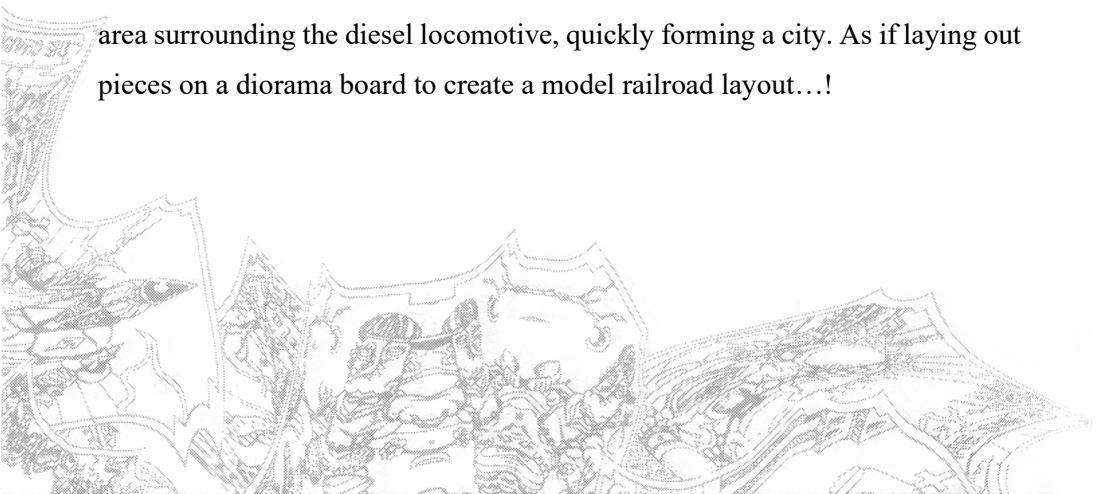
The process was the same they had seen during the previous days, but extraordinarily amplified.

Countless pieces swarming like bees, flying at an incredible speed towards the diesel locomotive. It took less than thirty seconds to recognise the identity of each of them with the naked eye.

Austere snowy mountains, large rivers, highways, public parks, residential neighbourhoods and entertainment districts, wheat fields, and still many other mirages of a miraculous limitless freedom… all of these, **pieces** of the United States of America.

The image spread over the horizon was a projection of the United States of America.

Those **pieces** that came flying like missiles, lunged one after the other at the area surrounding the diesel locomotive, quickly forming a city. As if laying out pieces on a diorama board to create a model railroad layout…!



– I can’t believe this… – whispered Joestar with an astonished look. – A city materialised in the middle of the desert! What nonsense, such a huge scale for a Stand ability!

– It has completely surrounded us – Abdul said in a sore tone. – The Stand User came out of the sandstorm, he was waiting for us. I don’t think he came to attack us, but it’s best not to underestimate them…

– The judgement of character will have to wait! – yelled Polnareff. – Leading us out to such a large field of operation is undeniable proof of the fact that the enemy has finally shown his true colours, declaring battle on us. At this point, the best thing to do is prepare to face him!

– Well said – Joestar bowed his head in a gesture of agreement at Polnareff’s words.

– We are his objective. I don’t think it’s a good idea to stay on this train, and above all in the company of its driver. Come on, let’s jump down!

The diesel locomotive was the nerve centre of a very real enemy Stand. It swayed gently, sliding on the asphalt of a city district chock-full of skyscrapers.

– Hey, Absalom! Stop this train! – yelled Polnareff, glaring at the loudspeaker up above. But no answer came from Absalom.

– What, you don't hear us, maybe? Absalom! Stop it damn you! I said you need to stop this damn train!

Polnareff wildly unleashed his fists upon the wall separating the locomotive from the passenger car.

– You know you won’t get anything if you keep like this.

Finally Absalom’s voice was heard answering from the loudspeaker.

– We are not in a situation of emergency, therefore stopping is not allowed, nor is getting off. Do you act like this on trains?

– Hein, what's your problem? Don't you see? Wash your eyes and look closely! Don't you think this might be an obvious emergency situation?!

– Really? As I understand it, everything is going according to plan. After crossing the sandstorm, we will pass through this mirage-city. Such is what is foreseen on the schedule.

– What?!

A trap, it really was a trap!

An instant after realising it, the group searched in vain for a way out, regardless of where it led.

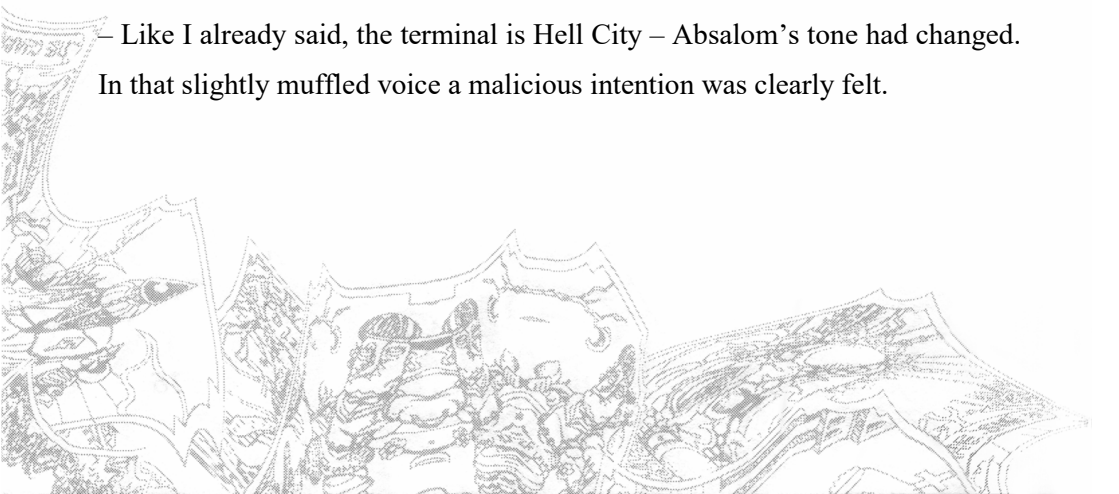
Adapting quickly to the sudden changes in circumstances, and immediately taking adequate action. This was obvious proof of their calibre: they were **proficient warriors**, capable of getting by in an infinite variety of ways. However, even through the **adequate actions of proficient warriors**, they didn't easily find an exit.

The fixed windows remained in place, and not even a crack appeared on that very thick glass. Neither did the opening and closing valves of the automatic doors give signs of life.

– It's useless – Absalom said in an amused tone. – The manual valves work only in case of emergency.

– He can sense our every move! – shouted Polnareff, grinding his teeth in anger.

– Like I already said, the terminal is Hell City – Absalom's tone had changed. In that slightly muffled voice a malicious intention was clearly felt.



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Gradually as the diesel locomotive made its way, the rails ahead and behind vanished. It ran along, **composing its own rails. Under the wheels it dropped a track of about three meters over which it ran.**

At this point, the group realised that this diesel locomotive which was going through the mirage-city was an enemy Stand, and they were trapped inside of it.

– It seems you've noticed it a bit too late – came Absalom's compassionate voice from the loudspeaker. – Yes, that's it. My Stand, Satanic Coupler, solidifies and displaces matter. Unlike yours it is visible and tangible, and if I skilfully shape it into a locomotive, it is most unlikely that it will be taken for a Stand. This has been demonstrated by you. It made collecting all sorts of information worth it.

– Is he some train nerd Stand User like the old geezer? Yare yare daze – Jotaro whispered.

– Hah hah hah! And so I am a nerd, hm? It's not completely wrong. Satanic Coupler, as it is known, is the biggest and most original railway model in the world – said a deeply moved Absalom, letting out a brief sigh. – To be honest, it took a long time to obtain such a result. As you can well imagine, by living in a desert one is easily cut off from civilisation, and gathering information becomes a challenge. Fresh news like that of earlier on air conditioners or on the spring dampers never reached me. I don't really know what an air vent valve is, but… In any case I pieced together excerpts of news, and by materialising them I managed to create this diesel locomotive.

– He's the kind that loves talking, huh? But being too full of yourself ends up being risky in the long run!

Jotaro and his companions all released their Stands together. Each of them condensed his own life energy in the air, and immediately all assumed a well-defined form.

Silver Chariot, Polnareff's Stand, was a skilled swordsman with a body covered in solid armour.

Hermit Purple, Joestar's Stand, appeared in the shape of vines and thorns that unravelled from both wrists.

Magician's Red, Abdul's Stand, was a flaming colossus with the head of a bird of prey.

Hierophant Green, Kakyoin's Stand, consisted of a mysterious amphibian man with green skin.

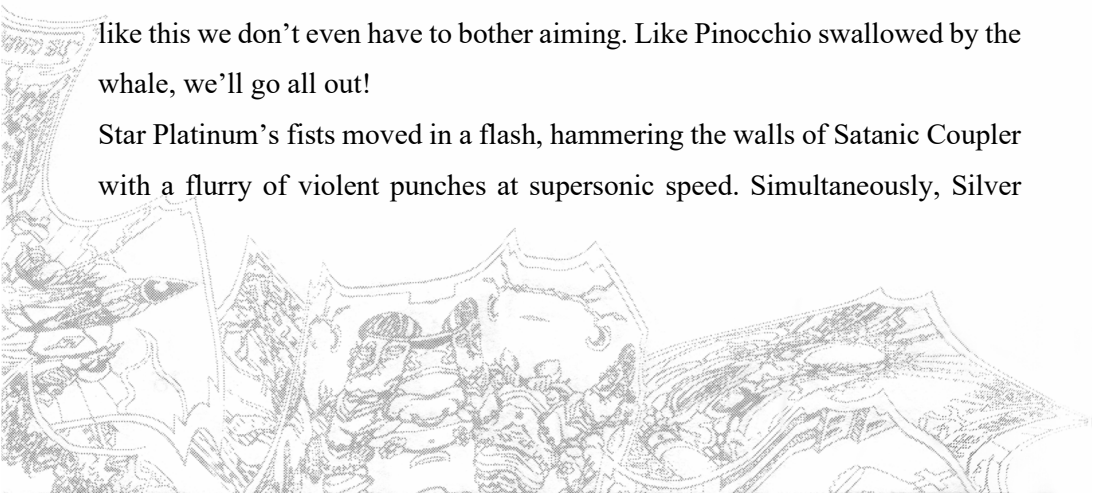
The Fool, Iggy's Stand, was a winged robot dog.

And finally Star Platinum, Jotaro's Stand was a powerful warrior with a fearless and valiant face like a bygone roman gladiator.

The six Stands bravely appeared and formed a circle around Jotaro and his friends, as if to defend them.

– He believes he has stopped and defeated us – said Polnareff, a bold smile displayed on his lips. – You must be so stupid. Do you think that the poison you swallow won't wreak havoc in your stomach? Up and down, left and right, your stupid Stand is wherever we look. If you expose your defenceless insides like this we don't even have to bother aiming. Like Pinocchio swallowed by the whale, we'll go all out!

Star Platinum's fists moved in a flash, hammering the walls of Satanic Coupler with a flurry of violent punches at supersonic speed. Simultaneously, Silver



Chariot's sabre thrust deep into the floor, even causing a blinding glare. Meanwhile, the incendiary flames that burst out of Magician's Red went to hit the ceiling.

However that onslaught was very easily countered.

No, **it did not reciprocate**. Satanic Coupler had **avoided every hit**. Each part under attack expanded unbelievably to the outside like a large rubber balloon **cushioning all sorts of blows**.

– Damned bastard!

Jotaro and his companions commanded their Stands to launch an attack yet again, but the result was exactly the same as before. Until now they had taken down plenty of enemy Stands, however they had yet to figure out Satanic Coupler.

– What a bunch of idiots! – Absalom's cheerful voice flowed onto Jotaro's head, leaving him stunned.

– Haven't I told you before? "Our prime duty is to ensure the safety of our passengers", therefore, in order to protect our most esteemed clientele, Satanic Coupler's interior is made up of soft and impact-proof materials. Don't you find the shock absorbing to be marvellous? It's a great difference when regarding Pinocchio's whale, and so I highly recommend you abandon the idea of unleashing any attack aboard my Satanic Coupler.

– I see – Jotaro's pupils dilated, giving off a cunning spark. – Now, if I'm getting it right, there's a huge difference from Pinocchio's whale. So you'd find yourself hopeless against an attack from the outside?

Absalom gave an annoyed snort, as if mocking them.

– You'll never be able to attack me from the outside, simply because you'll die here!

– You didn't answer the question! I asked you if you're vulnerable to exterior attacks!

– You'll be going outside, after you die!

– Didn't answer this time as well, huh? Well then, we'll have to test it ourselves.

– Jotaro, don't you think that's being too optimistic? – shouted an irked Kakyoin. – Do you have anything in mind? Why don't you keep fighting?

– It's plain to see.

– Don't try to be funny, you know very well I can't see! Step aside and watch my Emerald Splash in action!

– Cut it out Kakyoin, it's useless!

Kakyoin moved away from Joestar and released Hierophant Green's fighting spirit with all its power.

– Emerald Splash!

From the palm of Hierophant Green's hand burst out a destructive energy made of emeralds that fired in succession against the walls and ceiling of the train.

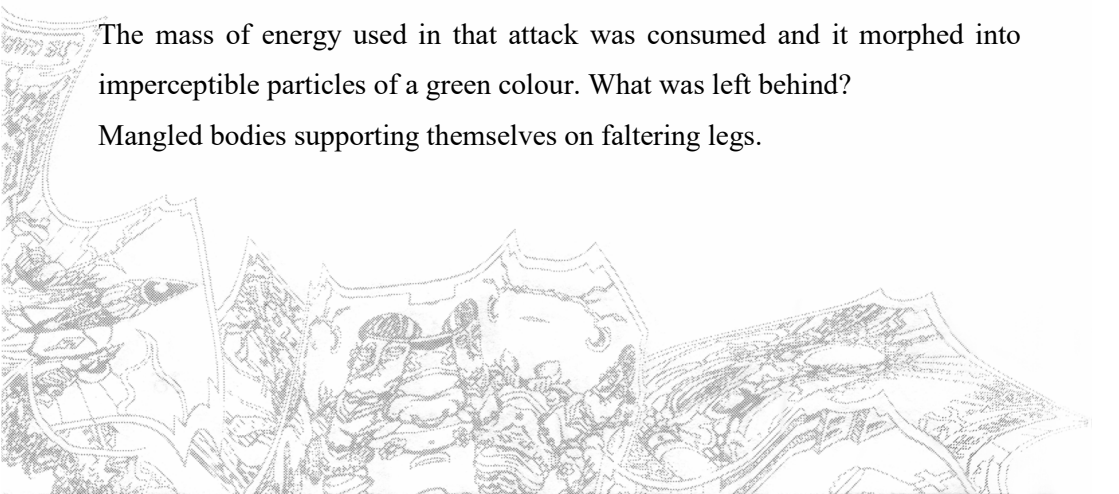
But even this time Satanic Coupler puffed out like a rubber balloon, cushioning the blow. And it didn't stop there, but created an inverse reaction.

Similar to emeralds, the bursts of destructive energy whirled like bullets in every direction of the narrow car, bouncing off the walls and ceiling.

Alongside an excruciating cry, a large quantity of blood soaked the floor.

The mass of energy used in that attack was consumed and it morphed into imperceptible particles of a green colour. What was left behind?

Mangled bodies supporting themselves on faltering legs.



– And now how will you make it? I have the feeling that you've been injured by your own Stand in this last attack. Regulating the shock absorption isn't child's play. You have understood, once and for all, that you are aboard Satanic Coupler and that your Stands are no stronger than insects… The fun is over!

Absalom's arrogant voice boomed all around, and from the floor of Satanic Coupler emerged long tentacles that at once wrapped around Jotaro and his friends and threw them on the floor. Then they released a viscous and paralysing liquid on the defenceless bodies of the group, who squirmed in vain to avoid certain death.

Meanwhile the walls and ceiling started to lose colour, like a tide slowly receding, little by little becoming as transparent as glass.

All of a sudden, something crossed into the group's field of view, blocking out the landscape.

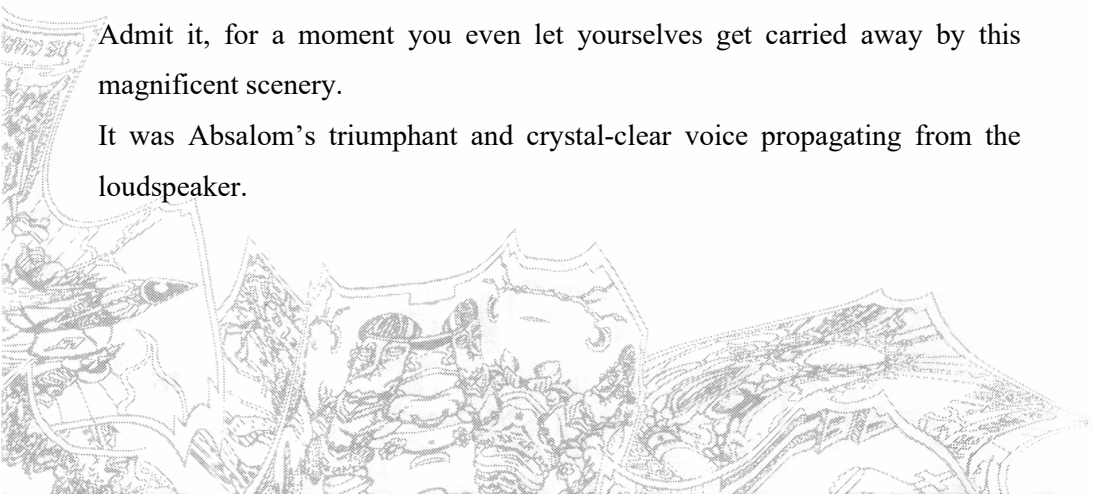
It was the **materialisation of a mirage**, a landscape similar akin to a bizarre and demented nightmare.

I see, that's what it is.

They were inside a mirage and focusing only on a way to escape Satanic Coupler had completely slipped their minds. That Stand wasn't the only enemy: all around them stretched a made-up city, a further danger to face.

– Isn't it a wonderful sight? There's nothing obstructing your view now… Admit it, for a moment you even let yourselves get carried away by this magnificent scenery.

It was Absalom's triumphant and crystal-clear voice propagating from the loudspeaker.



– One hell of a replica! – Joestar yelled – But why do all this?

– Simply because killing doesn't interest me… Basically, crushing you so easily doesn't satisfy me! – Absalom suddenly changed his tone: his voice wavered, but it openly showed his disdain.

– It's fair that you should suffer a bit! I won't ever concede to you the luxury of a painless death! Generally, in the desert it's hunger that does you in, but a death of this kind is certainly not the punishment that suits you. So be prepared, because you are in serious danger… You have no hope of escaping a cruel death especially designed for you. You civilised men will suffer, suffer, suffer, die, and your soul and your body will be reduced to shreds!

Civilised men… what a strange thing to say here, Jotaro thought.

For him, the violent rage and hostility of Absalom of which they were targets were not to be solely attributed solely to the fact that he was an assassin sent by Dio. The reasons had to be sought further, and something much bigger had to be behind it.

A while later, though, Absalom returned to using a much calmer and oppressive tone, almost as if he was moved by a violent passion.

– It will be as if you were chained on your back to the top of a car madly going at a hundred per hour. The souls of each of you will drown in the panic. Madness… This is the death that most befits you! Why, exactly at four in the afternoon, according to schedule, you'll reach Hell City…

For Jotaro and his companions the situation seemed certainly dire, but despite being terrified they didn't let themselves become discouraged. Even because speeding at a hundred or two hundred kilometres an hour was not the only thing they feared.

In any way they couldn't stay indifferent to the scene unravelling before their eyes, and for the first time a shiver ran through their bodies. They were proud

of their hearts of steel, and they would have challenged Dio at the cost of their lives, without any hesitation.

5

The environment surrounding human beings has its “laws”.

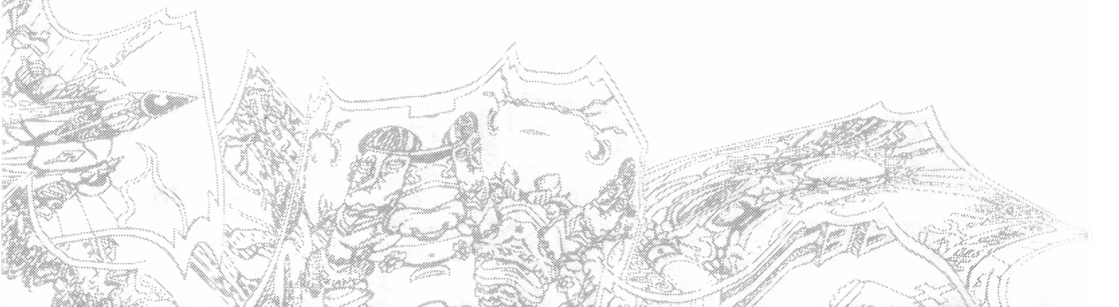
If within it there was no common thread, books on quantum physics and philosophy would turn out unintelligible. On the one hand we have the “law” of the so-called practical sense, which we can define as clear and satisfactory. On the other hand we have the “laws” of common sense, whose existence is hardly noticed. For example: roofs generally sit atop buildings, and buildings are vertically built atop solid foundations.

However, Jotaro and his companions only first became aware of these “laws” when they found themselves face to face with a radically reshaped world.

Among other things, the environment surrounding us follows its own logic, according to which order is maintained: only like this can man go on existing without losing his mind.

The city that overthrew such “laws” and, even more, the horror of insanity, was featured in that mirage, in which rooftops were beneath buildings, and the structures rose diagonally from the ground.

There were no buildings standing upright, the river did not run on the surface, the entertainment districts were not beside shopping areas, the Statue of Liberty was not located in the surroundings of the island of Manhattan.



You could observe each of these details and get to tolerate them only by convincing yourself that it was some kind of sick joke: in that mirage-city everything seemed illogical. The pieces that made up its structure had gone entirely too far.

After having been long imprisoned in a world devoid of logic and akin to a nightmare, would a man still be capable of preserving his own mind? And, if that weren't enough, that myriad of nonsensical scenes did not just remain still, but followed one another at a dizzying pace before their eyes, like the fast scrolling images of a video.

The train was running down a highway. Inverted buildings towered obliquely from all sides, intersecting in the sky in an arch, under which it rushed through. Then, the train took a sharp turn, sparks shooting out of its wheels, and hurled into a building wall.

The eyes of the involuntary passengers closed reflexively, but the train blasted through the wall and kept roaring on. Coming out of a gallery, it dived into a river running in the sky. Suddenly the train was engulfed in countless tiny bubbles. It was the falls. It turned downwards and launched itself into the plunge basin, gaping in the centre of the shopping district, which clung vertically to the walls of the buildings.

They closed their eyes again, and when they hesitantly reopened them, the train had entered a large store. It started to climb a stairway that went through the food department, then it continued its ascent towards a snowy mountain that rose in the distance. They found themselves engulfed by an increasingly absurd world.

Few hours had passed, but enough to temporarily experience such a reality. They hadn't the faintest idea when everything would be over, it was a nightmare to which they were hopelessly chained to.

– Jotaro! Are you okay, Jotaro?! Answer me, Jotaro! Mr Joestar! Polnareff! Abdul! – Kakyoin, blind, couldn't be made aware of that infernal torture.

Iggy had lost consciousness, covered in the foam leaking from his mouth. Jotaro and the rest were not entirely unconscious, but still failed to answer Kakyoin's call. They couldn't bring themselves to utter a word, almost as if they couldn't breathe. They had vertigo. They felt a ringing in their ears. Their eyelids were twitching. Their features were warped. The heartbeat had increased seriously. Nausea. And more, their brains were in overdrive. They were in an obvious daze.

A very real Stand attack thought Jotaro while losing consciousness, like a thick fog was slowly coming down on him.

It is truly sickening. Like we're under perpetual hypnosis. I wish I could believe that, but I'm afraid my spirit has been overwhelmed. My sense of balance is falling apart. If the mirages must end with the sunset, maybe this nightmare city will disappear too. But until then we must believe in ourselves, we have to do it to preserve our minds. We have fallen into the abyss of madness but we'll find a way to escape it, even if defenceless. At this rate, according to Absalom, we'll reach hell at four in the afternoon…

– What's wrong, did something take you by surprise?

Amid the ringing in their ears they could clearly make out Absalom's grating voice.

– There's no reason to bring ghosts and spirits into play. For you beings from modern civilisation, it's only a matter of getting used to it. It all comes down to

an issue of placement and combination, don't you think? What's the matter, do these urban oddities scare you?

Again with civilised people. This bastard, Absalom, really has some fixation with this matter.

I see… the target of this guy's hatred is civilisation. He sure seems to hate modern civilisation. He's trying to torture us to death using an elaborate and vicious method just because we're civilised people of metropolitan origins.

Honestly, this isn't funny at all. Is he a naturalist, is it some hatred for the modern that's common in the countryside, or does he believe in some made up religion that worships nature… Whichever it is, this is a great nuisance. Hating civilisation is a selfish act. Sure, we don't come into this world by our own choice, but taking it out on those around you is certainly pointless.

Absalom, however, hates it to the point of having to pour it out on other people, even if his vast railway points to the contrary. Not to mention that he uses a diesel locomotive Stand...

– By the way, before reaching our destination I want to ask you something.

Absalom's muttering poured crystal clear from the loudspeaker.

– If I extracted from your brains the info on the latest model produced by the railway industry, my Satanic Coupler would achieve perfection…

The tentacles clinging to their bodies started pumping blood in gushes from their veins, as if they were trying to suck out their very souls.

– Wh-, aaack! What are you doing?! – Kakyoin had the unpleasant sensation of being literally engulfed, while the rest no longer had any strength left to resist.

As the tentacles writhed, strange transformations began to be seen aboard Satanic Coupler.

The entire equipment and the interior style were suffering an intense metamorphosis, hard to witness due to their transparency.

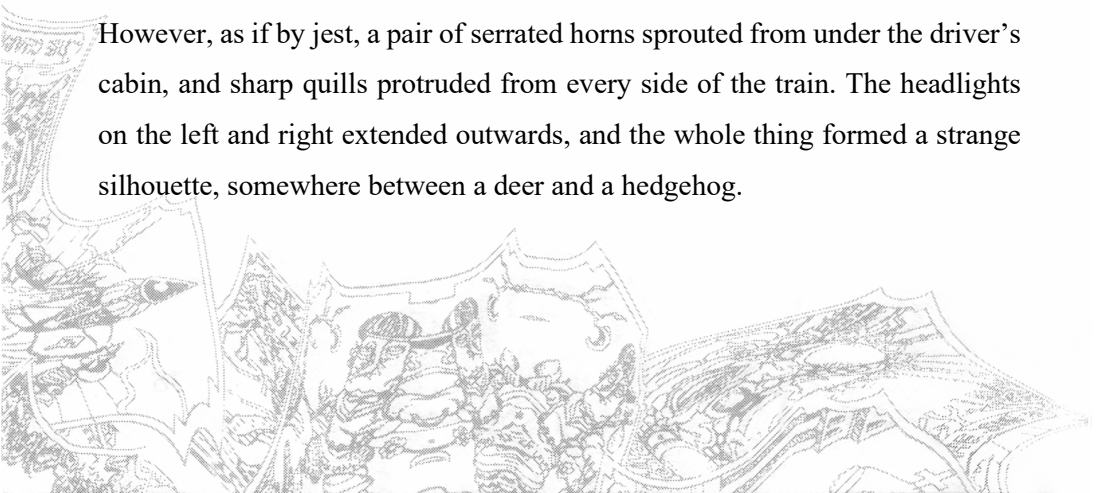
Shortly after, the train mutated into a copy of the latest model. The rough wooden seats turned into luxurious individual armchairs, and the walls and ceiling, initially covered with wood, became of stiff and smooth plastic. The chandeliers were replaced by fluorescent neon lights, and the fans by a modern air conditioning system. Even the windows grew larger, and were upgraded with rippling lace curtains, embroidered with palmette motifs.

Yare yare, such a thorough interior renovation thought Jotaro, from deep within his now weary consciousness. *That son of a bitch Absalom, thanks to the information he could collect from our brains he's been able to modernise his own Stand. I could fill it with bullshit! On the latest trains there are karaoke facilities, the commodities are countless, and the drivers dance stark naked. Who knows, maybe making him unable to tell reality from lies, even while under the grip of these tentacles, could be our only hope! I have no alternatives, I could suggest him opening a chasm on the train floor, so we manage to escape. Absalom won't be smart enough to notice…*

The outside of Satanic Coupler also gave signs of radical changes.

The locomotive and the passenger car, united up until then, had stretched out of proportions, then, breaking off, had formed two separate and autonomous wagons. Naturally, the train was equipped with hydraulic brakes and air valves while the headlights, now halogen, lit the road with a double light beam.

However, as if by jest, a pair of serrated horns sprouted from under the driver's cabin, and sharp quills protruded from every side of the train. The headlights on the left and right extended outwards, and the whole thing formed a strange silhouette, somewhere between a deer and a hedgehog.



This outcome was perhaps thanks to Iggy's imagination. After all, for a dog, a locomotive could look like a monster.

For Absalom all this was probably within norm, committed as he was to faithfully materialise with passion all the information he had collected from the brains of Jotaro and his friends.

– It is truly of an extraordinary beauty… – he whispered, pleased. – I couldn't have done better. As expected, the more it embodies the new, the more beautiful it becomes. It truly approaches perfection, but it's missing a single detail… For now, on board sales must be postponed: I was unable to create a seller. In the end, the packed lunches aren't all that important.

Packed lunches, packed lunches, packed lunches, packed lunches, packed lunches…

The words "packed lunches" echoed around inside Jotaro's mind, almost like a wizard's incantation.

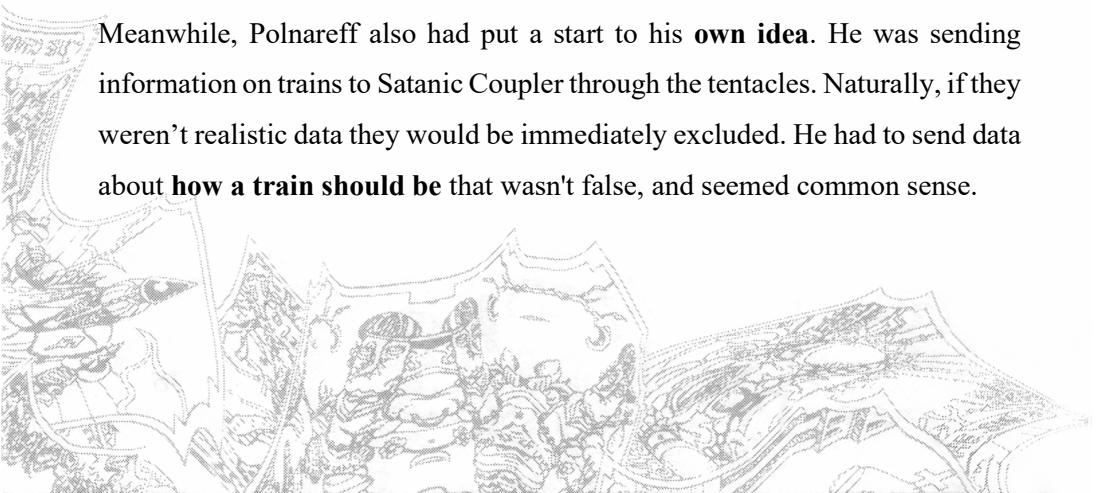
Suddenly a light bulb goes on in his head, **an idea**.

Jotaro recalled for a moment the darkness that would shortly suck them in, unrelentingly dragging them toward certain death.

Can I pull it off? Will it work? Is it worth a try?

No, I must do this! There's no other way for us to escape, so there's no choice but to give this stupid plan a try…!

Meanwhile, Polnareff also had put a start to his **own idea**. He was sending information on trains to Satanic Coupler through the tentacles. Naturally, if they weren't realistic data they would be immediately excluded. He had to send data about **how a train should be** that wasn't false, and seemed common sense.



Jotaro's **plan** clearly coincided with Polnareff's. Was it pure coincidence or teamwork dictated by mutual understanding?

The two tried, with all that they could muster, to imagine in their minds the information necessary for a change in the train. While the tentacles pumped data from their veins in streams, new information was hopefully gathered. In less than thirty seconds the **two plans** obtained vast results.

The tentacles retreated into the ground as if frightened, and Jotaro managed to free himself as well as the others. In addition, the fixed windows had changed into manual opening windows.

– What is going on? – yelled a confused Absalom.

– Come, let's get out!

Jotaro picked the fainted Iggy up in his arms and, rushing to the window, he jumped out. Polnareff followed suit, but Joestar, Abdul, and Kakyoin, unaware of the **two plans**, let precious time for their escape slip by. They understood the situation too late and were left staring at the windowpanes which had become fixed like before. They could do nothing but vent their rage by punching them.

Meanwhile Jotaro and Polnareff bounced repeatedly off the asphalt they threw themselves onto, before slowly coming to a halt. Since they immediately released their Stands to cushion the fall, they got out only minimally injured.

– No way! Only the two of us managed to escape!

– Us and the dog – Jotaro said, showing Iggy. He grabbed him by the scruff and dropped him. Iggy thumped on the ground, waking up with his own yelp.

There were skyscrapers everywhere besides the main road. Satanic Coupler suddenly hit the brakes and, spraying sparks everywhere, turned around.

– It's coming towards us! Jotaro, what do we do? – yelled Polnareff. – Mr Joestar and the rest are still inside! How do we help them?

Jotaro mumbled something and glanced again at Satanic Coupler which noisily hurled towards them.

– Can you stop it with your Silver Chariot?

– Don't think so. What if you used your Star Platinum? What do you think?

– It'll be rough, given our state.

– Come on, let's show that asshole who he's dealing with. I hate him, he makes me sick!

– Yeah, he's unpleasant.

– Still… we got to come up with a way to escape this place.

– Agreed!

Jotaro and Polnareff retraced their steps and started running as fast as they could. Iggy followed them closely.

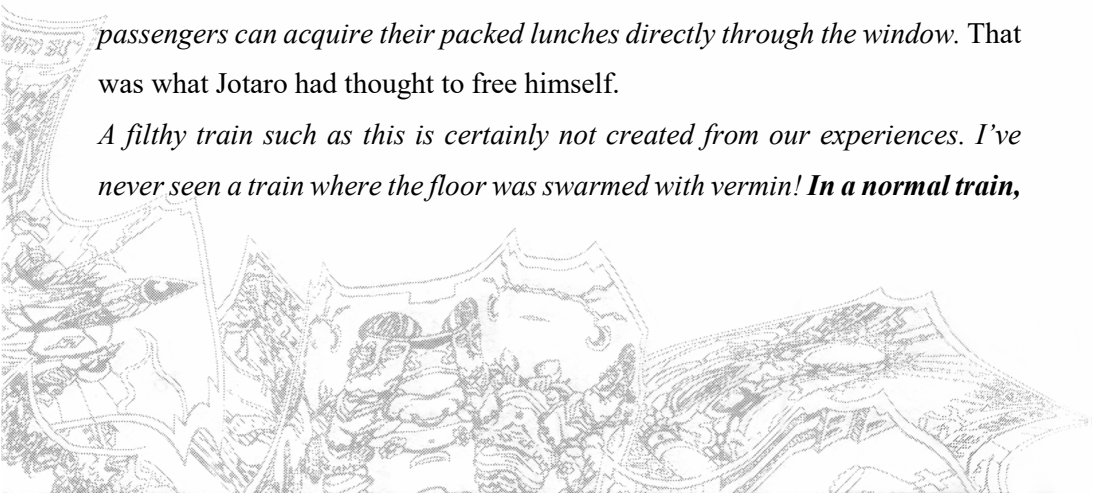
– Then, what do you have in mind? – Polnareff asked while running.

– Good question – Jotaro replied with the hint of a smile.

The **two plans** had really been a huge success. In the end, Jotaro and Polnareff had managed to escape Satanic Coupler by utilising its own ability.

Train trips are pleasant, there are a bunch of people selling packed lunches on board. Among these I also saw an octopus restocking the packed lunches every time it stopped by a station. If aboard there's no satisfactory food service ***it is determined that all windows are moveable.*** *Like this, without leaving, the passengers can acquire their packed lunches directly through the window.* That was what Jotaro had thought to free himself.

A filthy train such as this is certainly not created from our experiences. I've never seen a train where the floor was swarmed with vermin! ***In a normal train,***



there's no worms coming out of the ground, was what Polnareff had told in turn.

They had been right. Satanic Coupler had been created by loyally replicating the information flashing in the minds of its passengers.

6

Despair weakens man. Hope grants him renewed strength.

Having escaped from Satanic Coupler, Jotaro, Polnareff, and Iggy, clinging to some faint hope, ran along the alleys of the mirage-city at breakneck speed.

If they managed, then and there, to escape Satanic Coupler's pursuit, they would surely survive for at least another day or two. Time they would use to recover their strength and maybe to defeat Satanic Coupler in a next encounter…

However, anger had given them a surprising amount of energy again.

Deceived and humiliated, Absalom must have been on the verge of an explosive burst of wrath.

Satanic Coupler's colour changed from red to black and, at the peak of hostile wrath, it hungrily launched after Jotaro's group.

Fifty-fifty, as they say. Although if we wish to take into account the injuries suffered, the situation was certainly disadvantageous to Jotaro's group.

Weakened by hunger, thirst, and fatigue, and yet driven by hope, they were mysteriously too exhausted to run. They were not yet completely recovered from Satanic Coupler's psychological damage. Besides, the blood loss from the wounds caused by Emerald Splash, had swiftly stolen what little power remained within their bodies. On top of that, Jotaro's bleeding was severe. He

had taken the full brunt of the Emerald Splash because he guarded Kakyoin, who had been stuck standing since he was blind.

– Shit! If we don't manage to get them out, they'll become his hostages! This is what it means to be powerless! – shouted Polnareff, while looking behind his back at Satanic Coupler, loudly approaching them. This was clearly a demonstration of strength.

Truth be told, Jotaro, Polnareff, and Iggy had already tried unleashing an attack multiple times. But be it Star Platinum's devastating fists, Silver Chariot's blade, or The Fool's claws, they only had an impact on themselves, leaving Satanic Coupler unharmed.

The reason for that was plain to see: **Satanic Coupler's external plating wasn't soft like the inner one, but hard like armour to resist any attack.**

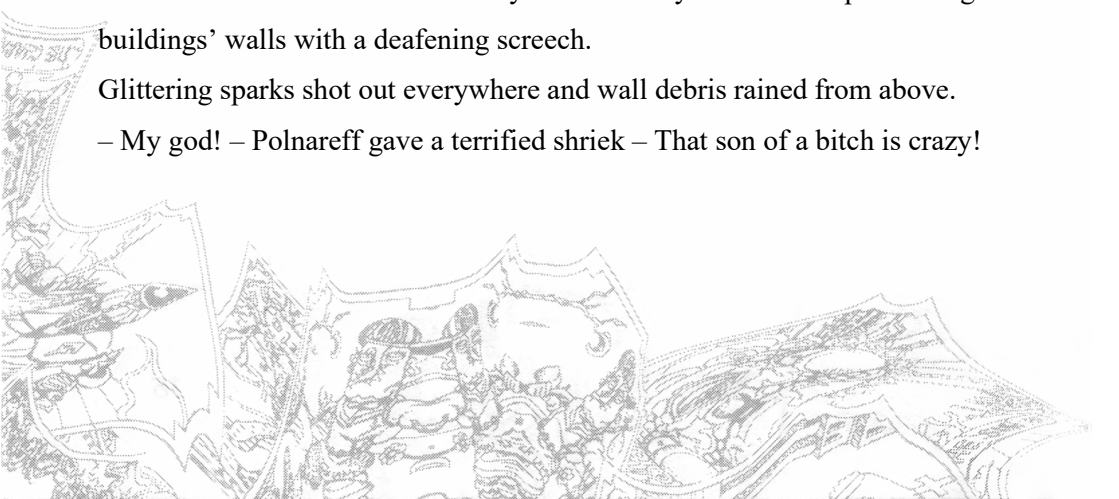
– Oh no! It's coming this way!

Satanic Coupler was approaching increasingly faster. The group took the left turn at the intersection and plunged into a narrow alley sandwiched between buildings, too small for a train. However, Satanic Coupler swerved aggressively, making a wide manoeuvre, the passenger car wildly swaying left and right like a serpent's tail, and the train managed to penetrate the alley.

Satanic Coupler was around three meters wide, while the path was no more than two. This difference was recklessly overcome by Satanic Coupler raking the buildings' walls with a deafening screech.

Glittering sparks shot out everywhere and wall debris rained from above.

– My god! – Polnareff gave a terrified shriek – That son of a bitch is crazy!



While it sent garbage bins and beer crates flying, Satanic Coupler gradually closed the distance to them. It broadcast its shrill and deafening siren which echoed on the building walls. Meanwhile the headlights delivered an ungodly red light. The two serrated horns bristling with sharp thorns made a terrible clatter. If a human being were to be struck by a weapon of similar dimension, he'd be left mutilated, unable to put up even the slightest resistance.

– Waaaaah! Forgive meee!

From the loudspeaker at the top boomed the angered voice of Absalom, who started to show signs of a fit of rage.

– Well, well… You wish to play with Absalom, hmm? But you'll pay for this mistake with your life! I'll crush you to death! I'll turn you into a pulp and feed you to the pigs!

– He's saying some disturbing stuff. Must've been quite the shock, being tricked by us! – Polnareff yelled at the top of his lungs as he desperately carried himself running.

– As a kid, I used to put a small coin on the rails, I liked watching the moment when they got crushed by the train. Sometimes I also happened to put stones, and I remember they were literally pulverised with a big crash. Then the train would brake suddenly, the driver tsked and was surprised when inspecting the wheels… and I, only in that moment, I felt terribly guilty. It was an awful experience, I think punishment would have been fitting in those moments.

– Oi, Polnareff, don't ramble. You're just wasting energy! – Jotaro barked.

– Heh, your grandfather said the same thing. You really fit in with the Joestars – After having said that, Polnareff huffed and changed into a serious tone, chewing his lips. – My bad. We're fumbling around just like rats, can't change anything about that. And, just so we're clear, I can't beat him with Silver Chariot in its current state.

Polnareff's muttering seemed truly grim.

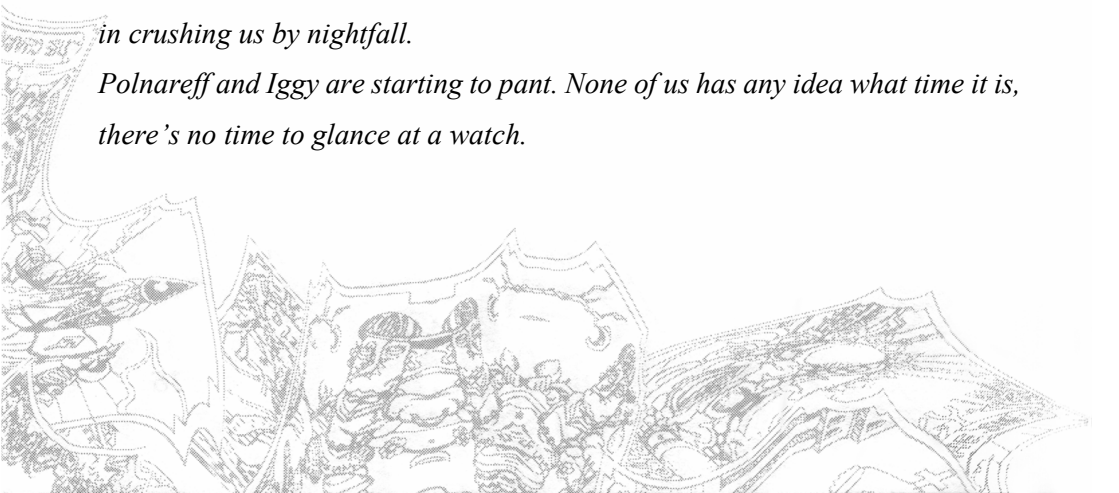
A Stand's source is one's life energy, and if this is weakened so will the Stand's power decrease. This was why there was no sign of the Stands of Jotaro and his companions, they were exhausted in every way. These were surely not the right conditions in which to face a battle, and they were worsening by the minute.

Even if we managed to leave this desert, what will we do? thought Jotaro. *If we managed to get out, though, this mirage would vanish and all our efforts would finally show results.* ***This I already have considered****. But the problem is: how to escape? We need to buy time and wait for the sunset, we must try to avoid Satanic Coupler's attacks. If the mirage disappears, so will the city. But if that's not the case, we will keep playing tag until that bastard, Absalom himself, makes the city disappear. If we let Satanic Coupler wander in this maze of streets, making use of its lack of flexibility, maybe we'll make it without being crushed somehow. If we don't make this mirage-city disappear soon, I'll lose my temper, that's sure.*

Still, that bastard turned out to be even worse than expected. Although he seems insane, he's quite sure of how to torment us. In war it is extremely advantageous to drag your opponent into your playing field. That we're being pursued without any chance to attack is enough proof of it.

Perhaps that bastard assumed that no matter how much we run, he'll succeed in crushing us by nightfall.

Polnareff and Iggy are starting to pant. None of us has any idea what time it is, there's no time to glance at a watch.



It was all planned by that bastard, and it seems unlikely we'll continue playing tag until nightfall.

– ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORAA! – Jotaro suddenly released Star Platinum, and its fists flung repeatedly against the building walls. Countless cracks formed on the walls and the fragmented chunks rained on Satanic Coupler like meteors. The latter braked suddenly almost as if scared, but then sped up again and, pushing away the fragments, reopened the way. Blinded with rage, he took several paths at random, always chasing Jotaro and his companions like a bull.

– Go on you filthy vermin! Go on, keep running, you're nothing but lowly sewer rats!

Yeah, we're nothing but sewer rats. We are wretched, trapped, sewer rats. But we're sewer rats with a perfectly functional brain. We should value the benefits of this attack: for now we managed to put some distance between it and us. For a while it shouldn't reach us. While running we have all the time in the world to reflect with calm. It's the first thing to do…

Jotaro's brain started racing, considering the many possibilities. They were seemingly mediocre ideas, but Jotaro was still an extremely clever guy.

When his Stand, Star Platinum, was in action, it not only excelled in attack, but also in the precision of its super-fast movements.

That was his true nature. At a first glance it could all seem the result of improvisation, however each movement of Star Platinum's resulted from an extremely meticulous calculation. So, studying all the possibilities, Jotaro discovered many weaknesses in the enemy and developed many unexpected solutions. All that remained was to make them a reality, and he wished to do that right then.

I must urgently reflect on a thing.

What kind of place is this? ***More importantly, who made this mirage-city?***

Absalom? I don't think so. A Stand like this can't originate from a single User, this is a damned Stand with unparalleled power. Satanic Coupler, Absalom's Stand… is none other than the diesel locomotive!

I don't think it has the power to ***materialise a mirage****.* ***This kind of stuff can only be done by specialised Stands, so there has to be another Stand User on Absalom's side.***

He's involving us in a team game. Well, no doubt about it, they make a good match, and are good at this.

But where might his helper be hiding? In the city or outside? We shall find out…

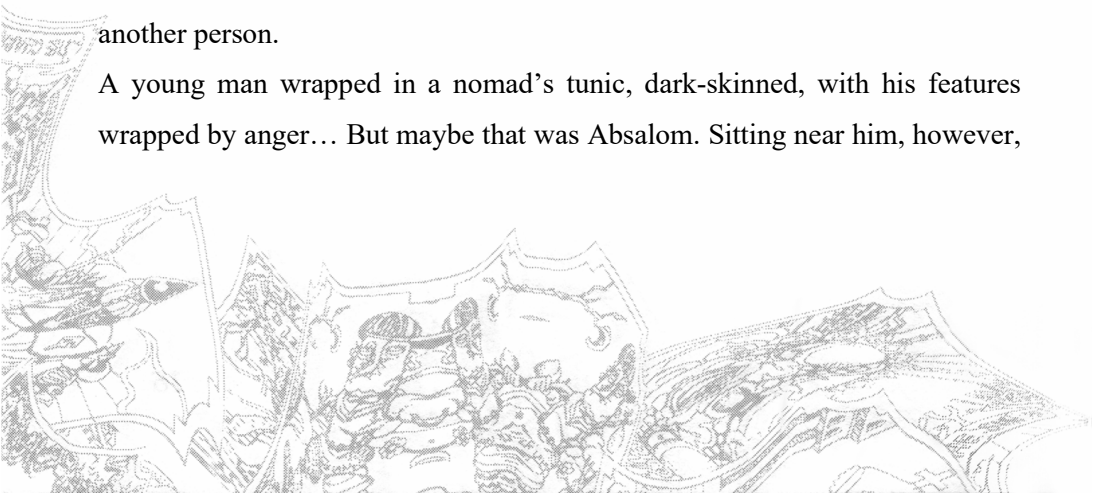
Ha!

Jotaro carefully observed Satanic Coupler. The driver's cabin gave off a dazzling iridescent light. A few hours earlier, during the sandstorm, when they came across Satanic Coupler, Jotaro had reflexively taken a look at the driver's cabin and had seen someone's silhouette. So how many were there?... Maybe two?

Of course, yes, that was exactly it!

Thanks to Star Platinum's ability and its telescopic eyesight, he had managed to accurately observe Satanic Coupler's driver's cabin. Indeed there was another person.

A young man wrapped in a nomad's tunic, dark-skinned, with his features wrapped by anger… But maybe that was Absalom. Sitting near him, however,



was a woman with the same clothing and the same complexion. She was about sixteen, seventeen years old, with a pretty face and a terribly shy look.

With Star Platinum's eyes, the still outline of a Stand with crystalline body could be clearly discerned next to her. On a large lens embedded on its chest converged rays of light and on its surface stirred a viscous and iridescent light…

There, **that was the Stand with the power to materialise mirages!**

– Shit! It's a dead end!

Polnareff and Iggy, who were running across the road, stopped in surprise.

The alley was suddenly interrupted, there was a wide valley impeding passage. It extended vertically like a precipice, and like this it didn't allow them to jump, nor slide down.

– Go on, call out your Stand, Iggy!

At Jotaro's menacing voice, Iggy took flight and The Fool extended its huge wings, hovering in the air.

– Right! – cheered Polnareff. – We hold onto The Fool and go over this valley, yeah?!

– Well, we will have another chance for that!

Star Platinum seized hold of The Fool by the scruff and steered towards Satanic Coupler's driver's cabin with a Herculean force. Jotaro's voice reverberated in the air, chasing the locomotive.

– ORA ORA ORA! Come on, let's terrify him as much as we can, I want to scare him to death!

For that, The Fool's threatening and at the same time frightened look was already enough.

Absalom and the girl would have been incapable of defending Satanic Coupler for a long time from The Fool, which was hurtling against it. Iggy's Stand

launched itself against the locomotive's windshield, pulverising it, and the girl's face assumed the guise of terror.

In that same moment, the mirage-city vanished without a trace.

Not even a fragment of the buildings was left, nor of the shopping centre: everything vanished out of nowhere like a dream.

In place of the city extended no more, no less than the same monotonous flat landscape they had to endure for more than four days. Jotaro, Polnareff, and Iggy were left standing in the desert, feeling the sand under their feet.

Meanwhile, in Satanic Coupler's driver's cabin that settled twenty meters ahead, Absalom and the girl stared at them shocked. In those strained expressions the tint of disappointment surfaced clearly, by having watched a victory with ninety-nine percent assurance crumble like a vanishing mirage.

Jotaro and his companions did not wish to let escape that brief and glorious moment of advantage.

With a cry from Polnareff, Silver Chariot, which rushed proud and fierce beside him, thrust into Satanic Coupler's pilot his blade made of fighting spirit. However, it couldn't even leave a scratch on the steel armour.

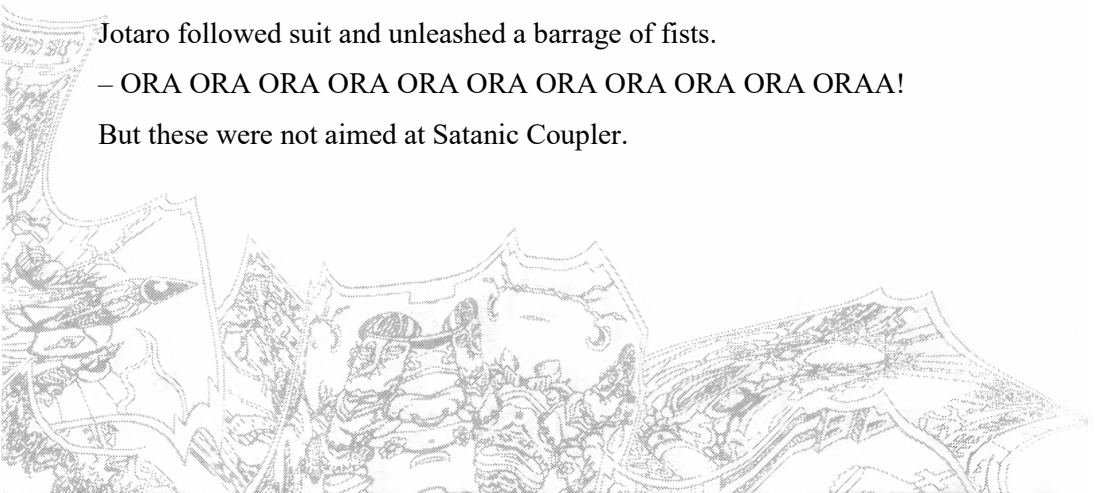
Without hesitation, Jotaro shouted in a hurry.

– Move, Polnareff!

Polnareff focused all the energy left of his fighting spirit in Silver Chariot. Jotaro followed suit and unleashed a barrage of fists.

– ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORAA!

But these were not aimed at Satanic Coupler.



Without warning, a strange explosion in the desert spread before them, giving rise to a large tidal wave of floating sand. Absalom tried in vain to get back, but the huge wave of sand was much faster and engulfed Satanic Coupler at once. The windshield of the driver's cabin was obscured, and the train fell in darkness. The windscreen wipers, barely moving, managed to move away the sand that blocked their view. From Absalom's throat rose a surprised groan.

Meanwhile, the shapes of Jotaro and his friends vanished from the desert unexpectedly. His sight had been temporarily obstructed for two or three seconds, and in the moment in which he opened his mouth, they were already gone.

– Where, Where are they?! Where did they hide?! – Absalom, swaying abruptly, turned around and began to meticulously scrutinise the surrounding area. Still, he was unable to make out the shapes of Jotaro and his companions. You couldn't surely expect they were hiding in the shadow of a large tree, since the desert lacks those. And yet there was no proof of their escape, their tracks were missing. Everything led to believe they had effectively vanished into thin air.

– Are they hiding behind Satanic Coupler… No, there's no signs of that. I don't feel them clinging to the frame nor climbing to the top of it. But then where the hell did they go?! – said an upset Absalom, landing punches against the control panel.

– I will not believe they vanished into thin air! Jotaro and Polnareff's Stand abilities aren't capable of this kind of magic tricks!

Right in that moment, Absalom's pupils dilated and his eyes grew wide with shock.

– Now I get it! It was that dog, that dog's Stand! That winged Stand, The Fool! Yes, that's it, those idiots latched onto it and disappeared into the sky… – he chuckled. – A smart move, no doubt about it!

Absalom turned to the girl who, glum and with bowed head, tried to avoid the man's critical gaze.

– Why did you call back your Stand?! If your Stand is gone, your Stand ability will stop having effect, and the city you built vanishes, don't you get it, Michal?! All the work I had chasing them all the way there… You've done an incredibly stupid thing, Michal!

The girl Stand User, named Michal, tried to communicate with gestures the fear of death she felt looming over her. Her mouth moved quickly, but not a single word managed to come out.

Absalom's face immediately assumed a more relaxed expression.

– Enough of that, Michal. I apologise for yelling. – he gently placed his hand on her shoulder.

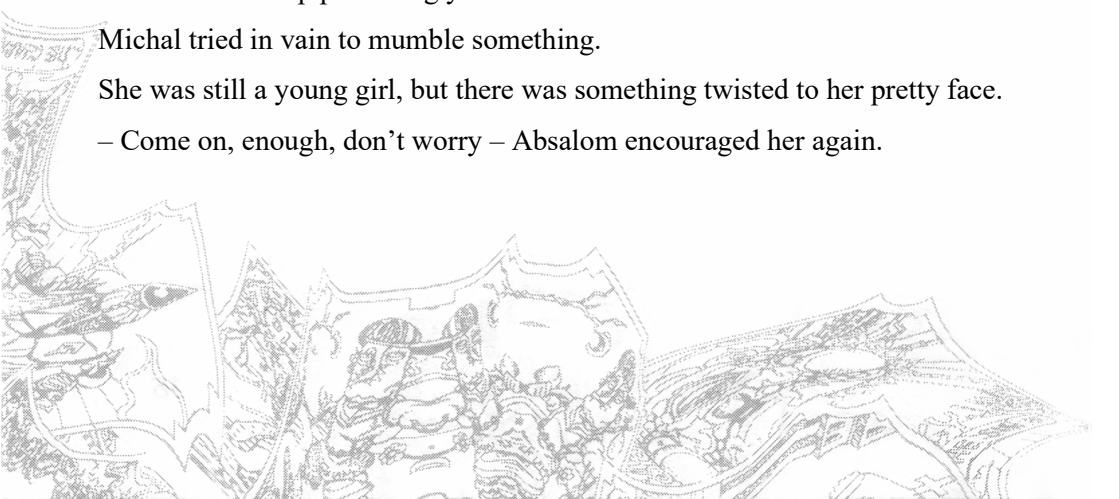
Michal tilted her head in a semblance of curiosity.

– I lost my temper. I'm a despicable being. You are a woman, you've subconsciously stifled your fighting spirit, intimidated by that dog's infernal Stand. And even if this is why, it's not your fault. I'll always be your brother, and I'll never stop protecting you.

Michal tried in vain to mumble something.

She was still a young girl, but there was something twisted to her pretty face.

– Come on, enough, don't worry – Absalom encouraged her again.



– There shall be other opportunities. If they managed to survive, they will surely return to save the hostages. We can set a trap for them, and when we meet face to face, it'll be the end of them! I can already taste the moment when we hand Lord Dio the bloody heads of these five Stand Users.

Satanic Coupler clamoured away, raising a large dust cloud. In the immediate vicinity were Jotaro and his companions, unsuspecting.

Absalom had overestimated The Fools flying capacity, which in reality could be compared to that of a glider. Not only it couldn't fly in the absence of wind, but neither did it have the strength to stay in the air for long carrying two people. Perhaps if he had been aware of this, he would have certainly noticed that Jotaro's group hadn't been in the air, let alone escaped to who knows where.

Satanic Coupler's shape vanished beyond the line of horizon, leaving a cloudy trail of sand; Jotaro, Polnareff, and Iggy showed up in the immediate vicinity covered by the school uniform.

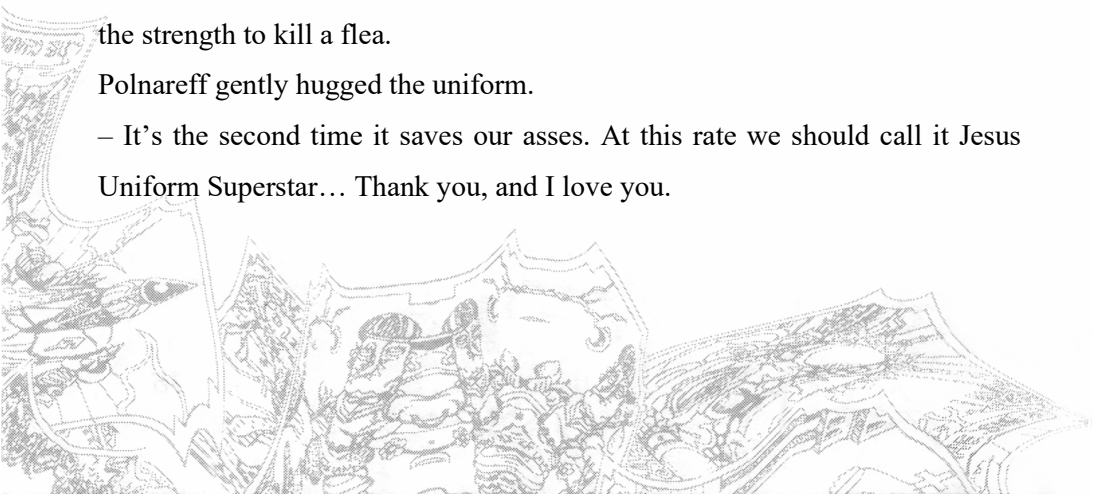
– Huff… that was close.

Polnareff, raising his head, let out a huge sigh of relief.

– That damned machine flew low to the ground. Another thirty centimetres and we would have died thorn to pieces. But at least we have stopped playing tag at that speed. Mimicking a mole was the right idea, Jotaro. I no longer even have the strength to kill a flea.

Polnareff gently hugged the uniform.

– It's the second time it saves our asses. At this rate we should call it Jesus Uniform Superstar… Thank you, and I love you.



Jotaro burst out laughing upon seeing Polnareff kiss the uniform's collar.

Meanwhile Iggy, sprawled as he was, targeted Jotaro's face with the sand he clawed out.

– Hey, Hey, watch it, I'll get angry.

Jotaro reached his right hand out over Iggy's head, but he turned away.

– You've done a great job, Iggy. It was a good thing your Stand is ugly. I wouldn't be shocked if it had a face like Tom Cruise.

Iggy, more and more angry at what Jotaro had dared say, lifted his hind leg to try and spray piss at Jotaro's face, but no matter how much he tried, not a drop came out of the dried-up weenie.

– But… Jotaro! – Polnareff interrupted, amazed. – How did you make the mirage-city disappear? Was it Iggy with his Stand?

– No… I rather think it was the girl's nerves. Intimidated by our attack, she must have lost her nerve and it had a negative effect on her damned Stand's strength.

– Really?

Polnareff bent down his head in astonishment, unaware up to then of the existence of Michal and her Stand.

The sun set to the west, and in the blue sky dissolved its blinding glare. Far away, small round clouds floated shyly.

– We have had a bunch of small nuisances – blurted Jotaro while watching the mackerel sky.

– Terrible. I can't take another step, and if I do it maybe I'll no longer be able to walk!

7

The desert had plunged into silence.

There was nothing quite like the radiance of the sunset.

The sky was becoming stained in a blood red.

The sand was still, only the trails of two people twisted and turned in that endless plane. They reached the foot of a sand dune: there ended the tracks and there Jotaro, Polnareff, and Iggy fell to the ground, exhausted.

The battle against Satanic Coupler had drained their energy to the last drop, but they still had to try to keep going, maybe east, where all these dunes were scattered. Of course, they already knew what they would see when they climbed to the top of the dune. However, if they didn't set a goal, their feet would not move another step.

They moved fifty meters and stopped, another hundred and they fell on their knees, exhausted… After an hour and many kilometres of walking they found themselves at the foot of a dune, and there, at their limits, they threw themselves onto the sand like cut down trees…

Jotaro's eyes were not yet completely closed. His vacant stare turned towards two mountains that reminded him of his mother's bosom. The two hills sat beside each other like women's breasts, and meanwhile a particularly bright star shone on the sky.

– Where have I seen a similar landscape? – mumbled Jotaro, in a state of half consciousness.

Two hills and a shining star.

A sight that reminded him of his childhood years.

Yes, it was just like this… Looks like a book illustration. A book I read when I was a little kid. A book my mother bought me for my sixth birthday… It was The Little Prince. *I remember that page two was a picture very similar to this landscape. Of course that Little Prince crashed in this place to then leave for his star. The author had written: «The place is the same as that on the preceding page, but I have drawn it again to impress it on your memory. Look at it carefully so that you will be sure to recognise it in case you travel some day to the African desert».*

Yes… ***this could be that place.***

Of course, at my age I can't really believe that the Little Prince has embarked on his journey starting off from here, but this place isn't much different from the original. If I searched the deserts of the whole world far and wide, I'm sure that I would never ever find a landscape more similar than this.

Travelling all the time doesn't make much sense, but it's always enrichening. It's as if every time I went in search of where The Little Prince *took place. If my mother had revealed where it was, I would have jumped up and down with joy, but I am somewhat shy, which is why I have never read that book in front of her. That habit was reserved for my moments of solitude. I recall that I read and reread it non-stop, sinking into the realm of dreams. I was a brat, I didn't say very smart things at that age, but of one thing I was sure: I absolutely loved that book. It may seem absurd, but that book really touched my heart.*

My mother never saw me with the book she gifted me in hand, and this left her very disheartened. If I had known I'd die like this, I would have been happy to read it in front of her at least once. After all, it would have been filial piety.

My mother… Yeah. If I don't make it, she'll die. But right now death doesn't terrify me.

We got away. These days we have been holding up well. We've faced death with determination and we can't complain of the result, I'm sure.

It would annoy me if that bastard, Absalom, won.

It would annoy me if we don't make it to Dio.

And I'll be particularly angry if I don't manage to save my mother from death.

If I were to have any regrets… no, my only regret is that I couldn't save my mother.

I no longer have the strength to stand. I'm really sorry for mother but, this is it…

– Yare yare… daze.

Uttering these words, Jotaro dozed off, but after a short while he became aware, with his reduced sight, that something moved in the distance. He raised his heavy and weary eyelids and turned his gaze to the top of the hill.

There was a small boy up there.

*No, I can't believe it. The **Little Prince** showed up!*

*Grandpa had warned me. The victims of the desert, before dying, start having hallucinations… Has my time come? The **Little Prince** has showed up. And not just that, he looks an awful lot like the book illustrations.*

– ●☆◆✻○▼□★♠△◎■◇▲…?

While the **Little Prince** changed clothes, he slid down the dune, addressing Jotaro in a strange and incomprehensible foreign tongue.

There, now I started having auditory hallucinations! Thought an upset Jotaro, closing his eyes.

But that was not an auditory hallucination.

And the **Little Prince** was also not an hallucination.
In that moment Jotaro had the faint sensation of being touched by shaky fingers.
The **Little Prince** was a young desert nomad.

Even in the past, oases had revealed to be kind to mankind.
People knew only arid deserts, and upon finding the peacefulness of an oasis, would quickly build there a village. Obviously, the motive was the water. That's why when victims of the desert arrived at an oasis, they immediately came back to their senses. In this case, even they weren't an exception, seeing that they were about to die of thirst.
The nomad that discovered Jotaro's group quickly returned to tell the village. It was thirty minutes away on foot beyond the dune above which the small silhouette could be seen in the distance.
Jotaro, Polnareff, and Iggy were brought to the village and there avidly drank fresh and clean water, just pumped from an old stone well. The villagers tried, through gestures, to tell them to drink slower but they, paying no heed to the advice, continued to gobble it down.
That water was of a unique delicacy. No other elaborate culinary art in the world could rival its excellence. Cooking is certainly a joy, but the water of that oasis flooded their bodies with a feeling of delight that went far beyond palate. In the blink of an eye, as if by magic, they regained physical and mental vigour, like how withered grass comes back to life after being watered.
– I didn't remember water being so good! – exclaimed Polnareff, as he stared emotionally at the aluminium bowl filled to the brim.
– I'll never get tired of drinking. If someone came up to me and jokingly said that the water in the aqueduct is putrid, I'd beat the crap out of him.

The roasted lamb meat they were offered by the locals was incredibly delicious. Jotaro found it beyond comparison, he thought it wonderful.

Jotaro, Polnareff, and Iggy were eating and drinking avidly, and in no time recovered sixty percent of their energies, previously at their limit.

– A thanks seems to be the least we can do… Everything's delicious. Thanks to you, we've escaped certain death – Jotaro, turning to the village elder, the only one who could speak English (he learnt it during the Second World War), gave him a heartfelt thanks.

The old man gave a small nod with his head to indicate approval and called Jotaro and his companions to warm up near the fire.

What was that? Some sort of custom in honour of those fallen in the desert or were they simply gathered around the fire?

Jotaro and Polnareff took a look around them: the people, of dark skin, wore white tunics and were particularly taciturn. They seemed preoccupied and at the same time suspicious.

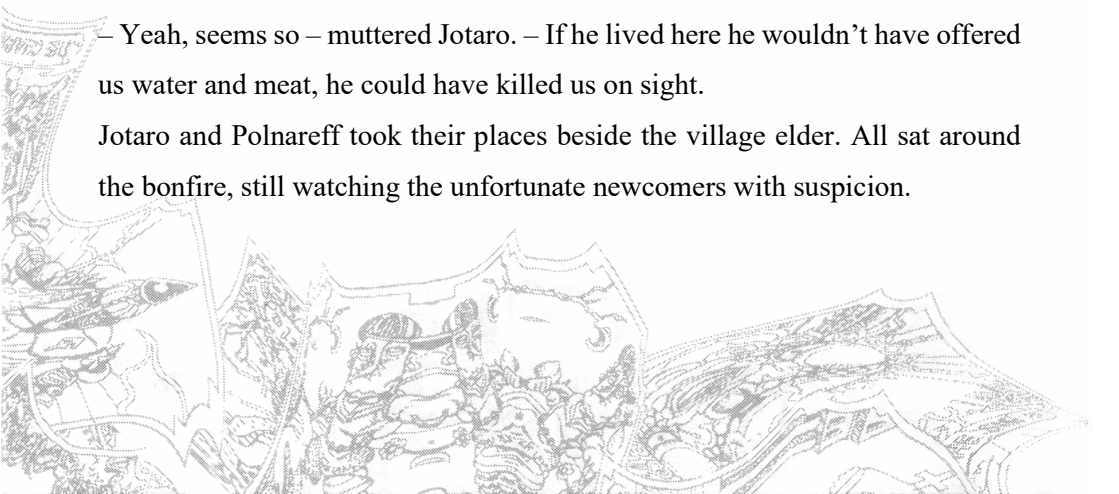
The bonfire's flames cast deep shadows on their faces, heightening even more that atmosphere of prudence.

Jotaro thought that whoever had lived silently and at length in a cruel place such as the desert would, in the end, inevitably wear an expression of the kind.

– Seems like Absalom isn't here – Polnareff whispered in Jotaro's ear.

– Yeah, seems so – muttered Jotaro. – If he lived here he wouldn't have offered us water and meat, he could have killed us on sight.

Jotaro and Polnareff took their places beside the village elder. All sat around the bonfire, still watching the unfortunate newcomers with suspicion.



– They don’t say a word – said Polnareff, warily observing the scene presented before them.

– How can someone live in such conditions? There are no cars, no phones, no washing machines nor gas stoves. There’s no signs of civilisation.

– For that matter, they don’t even have electricity – Jotaro added sharply.

– It’s like time has stopped in prehistory. They have water, food, and houses, but everything else is just sand. Who knows how many places like this there are in the world. Spots where nothing exists apart from the men inhabiting them. Just think about it for a moment and many others come to mind.

Jotaro completely shared Polnareff’s opinion.

Life in the village didn’t seem to differ much from that in prehistory. It felt like they had willingly kept living in the stone age, preventing progress from taking place. Lined up around the bonfire, the kitchen utensils: aluminium cups and bowls showed how little progress had influenced life in the village.

– Go ahead, drink, you’ll feel better – said with a slight smile the old man with wrinkled skin, offering aluminium cups to Jotaro and Polnareff. Each took his own and shared a look, filling their mouths with the thick greyish liquid swaying at the bottom.

Immediately, Polnareff spit it out and shouted:

– Hey, what is this stuff?! What a terrible taste!

– It’s medicine – the old man replied, laughing. – It’s a miraculous medicine of our making, its benefits are wonderful. That’s why we keep making it for a hundred years now. By the way, it is obtained from the desert lizard--

– No, no, I’m good! I don’t want to hear another word – said Polnareff waving his hands and cutting off the old man’s words.

The elderly man, amused, burst into thunderous laughter. By then the cautious stares of the village habitants finally softened.

– What do you want, it's been more than five years since the last time foreigners came to visit us – said the old man, turning to his neighbours. – To everyone, you're so unusual that there's no helping it. I find it troublesome but please be patient, because this is an uncivilised village with nothing going on.

– Well, I thought of saying, "take a good look and see if you like this face, we mean no harm".

The old man translated what Polnareff said into the local language. Among the villagers there was a general low laughter.

Immediately after, the old man, puzzled, took a look at Iggy, who was chewing on a lamb bone under the eaves of a rough masonry house.

– But back to you. How did you ever end up in this place? Have you run out of clothes suitable for crossing the desert or did you go a bit too far when walking your dog?

– Would you believe it if we told you that… we were chased by a ghost train?

– Surely – was the old man's cold-blooded response.

– We… – Jotaro added – had come to find a friend that lives somewhere in this desert. But along the way our car broke down and later we were also taken by surprise by a sandstorm. That's all.

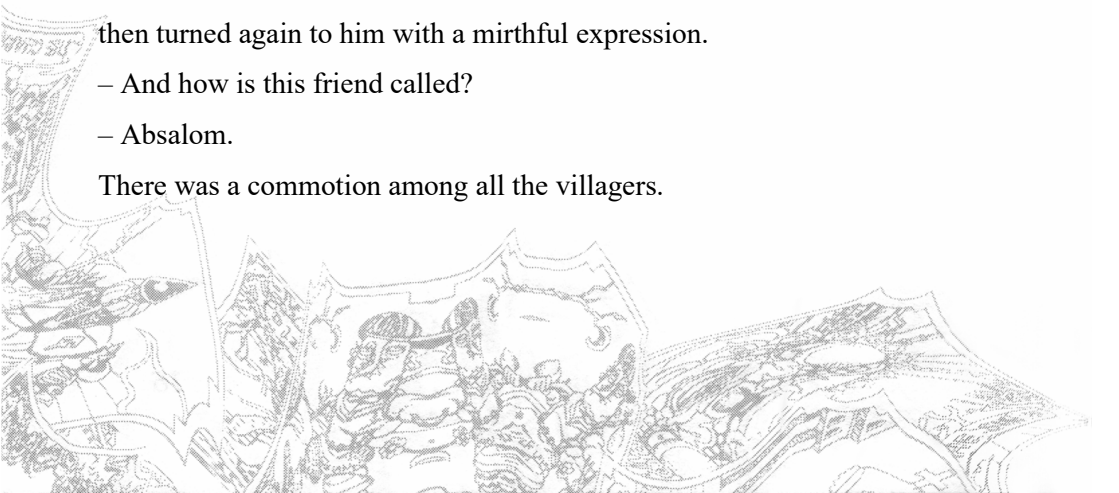
– Ah, a friend.

The old man translated into the local language what Jotaro said for the villagers, then turned again to him with a mirthful expression.

– And how is this friend called?

– Absalom.

There was a commotion among all the villagers.



– Why, do you know him, gramps? – Jotaro asked, ready to bombard him with questions.

– But surely – acquiesced the old man. – He used to live in this village not too long ago.

– You… You don't say! – Jotaro and Polnareff barely held back their surprise.

– But… the same Absalom who loves railways and trains?

– Exactly. And so you should be the friends who shared his passion and of whom he talked at length…

– I suppose so…

– Good – the old man gave a pleased smile. – Well, Absalom will be surely thrilled by your visit.

– Indeed. Now, where is he?

– If you walk for around two hours towards North, you'll find him at a small oasis with his sister Michal.

– Sister? – Jotaro thought back to Absalom and the Stand User girl.

– Poor Absalom, we should pity him… – whispered the old man, saddened. – After losing both his parents in an accident in Cairo, he changed radically… He moved away from the village with his sister and from then on we've barely ever seen him.

Four years ago?[3] *In Cairo? That might be the year and place of Dio's return!* thought Jotaro.

– But what happened to him four years ago? – Jotaro asked with the utmost caution.

– Hmm… – The old man pondered for a bit, then, with a gentle smile, looked Jotaro in the eyes.

[3] T.N.: No one ever mentioned 4 years, not sure where Jotaro got that from.

– Might as well tell you. You're his friends, so it's best that you know. All the more so if you come from the civilised world…

All the while the wood kept crackling in the bonfire.

The sky was teeming with stars, and among these an immaculate full moon stood out. It shone so bright it seems you could reach out and touch it with a finger.

The old man, squinting his eyes as if he were focusing on something on its surface, slowly began to tell, word by word…

8

– Absalom is twenty years old. His younger sister, Michal, is sixteen. In fact, she probably just turned seventeen. Once they both lived in this village with their parents. The two got along so well, as well as with their parents, that it could make anyone envious. Absalom, since he was little, has always been a clever boy, and had one single flaw: that of having such a big and persistent curiosity that he often would stop adults to ask questions such as «why doesn't the moon fall?» or «how much sand is in the desert?», bothering them. By contrast, Michal, due to being extremely shy, was a girl who spoke little. But her wonderful features were Absalom's pride. The two siblings had a passion for mirages. Whenever they had free time they would go together, side by side, to peacefully watch them. Michal felt enchanted by the mirages' magic atmosphere. Absalom's hobby, however, was exclusively about the civilisations of the many countries reflected in the mirages.

This because be it the cities, the factories, or the ships as large as mountains, all were full of charm and mystery, which was more than enough to capture the heart of a boy. In young Absalom's eyes, the civilised world was as marvellous as that of magic. The tales that he occasionally collected from caravans and travellers that stopped by the village constantly spurred him on. *Beyond the desert is the Land of Happiness, more commonly known as Civilisation. There stretch dreamlike landscapes.* Absalom thought so. Buildings tall enough to reach the clouds, roads in the sky, steel pipes in which water flowed endlessly, thousands of people travelling down two parallel paths aboard large iron vehicles…

It was the trains.

What captured his interest was not the civilised world at large, but the railways and the trains. Those were what stole his heart. For him, the trains were the heroes created by human wisdom and embodied the symbol of civilisation.

Well, that in itself wasn't a problem at all but… the issue was, as he grew up, his admiration for the civilised world increased significantly until it became his only faith.

He believed it with all his heart. When he met civilisation he would become a happy person. Rather, **only in the civilised world could mankind know happiness…**

Meanwhile, as he loved the modern world, he started feeling extremely ashamed of the life he led in the desert. I too was worried, I told Absalom many times:

«No, Absalom. You still don't know the true face of civilisation. In the desert exist the day and the night, while in modern civilisation what seems to shine may hide a dark side. If you limit yourself to simply gazing at its best side, you'll never fully appreciate the modern world».

If in that moment he'd paid only a bit of attention to what I said, maybe that tragedy of four years ago wouldn't have happened.

It's already been four years since that regrettable and unfortunate incident.

– The incident in Cairo, where he lost both his parents, which you mentioned earlier? – Polnareff asked the old man.

– Exactly so. Absalom was seventeen back then but was already plenty obstinate. Actually, in the end, his parents, giving in to his nagging requests, took him to Cairo alongside his sister, Michal. Absalom, needless to say, was in heaven. Essentially, being able to visit his so beloved civilised world…

He had been waiting for that moment for a long time. But destiny was cruel, very cruel.

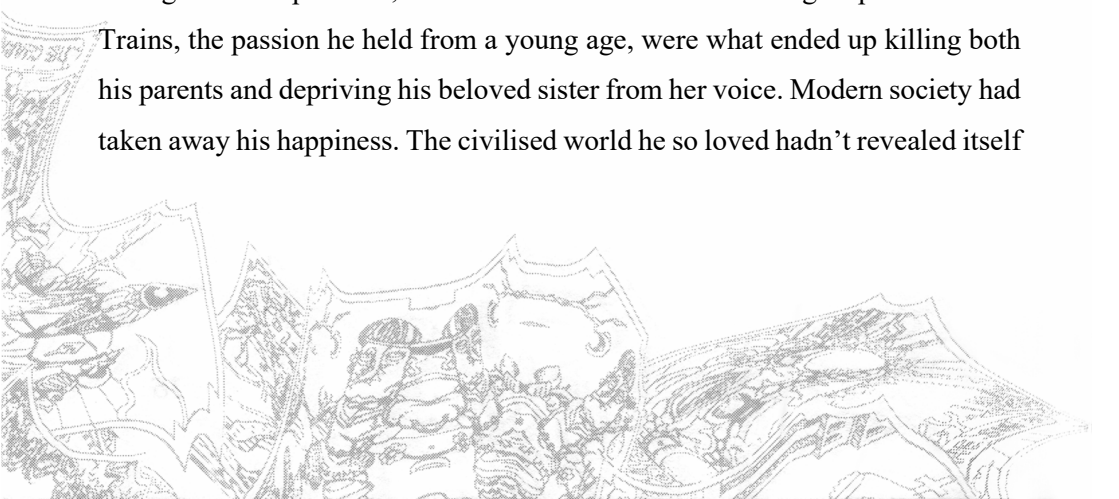
I don't know the exact details.

I know only that… The bus on which they travelled stopped on a level crossing, and that shortly after arrived a moving train… I'm sure of this.

Both parents died on impact. Absalom broke his legs, Michal instead was on the brink of death from a metal splinter that tore her throat.

But that's not all. Those who rushed to help gave priority to the locals and to those who offered rewards. Absalom and Michal, who were outsiders, were left for last. Needless to say that medical help came too late for Michal. Sure, she managed to escape death, but from then on she could no longer speak.

Trains, the passion he held from a young age, were what ended up killing both his parents and depriving his beloved sister from her voice. Modern society had taken away his happiness. The civilised world he so loved hadn't revealed itself



to be some Magical Land, nor a Land of Fortune. On the contrary, it was a City of Demons for the unfortunate.

Gah, remembering it still pains me.

That tragedy changed Absalom down to his core. The modern world, in his eyes, was a wretched delusion and from then on he could no longer put a lid to the contempt he began to harbour towards it. A hate a hundred times greater than his love.

Six months after, when he returned to the village, he was a completely different person, he seemed a ghost. By then he had lost all faith in the civilised world, he strongly detested it, but this did not fully bring about a reconciliation with life in the desert. Poor Absalom… In his eyes dwelt a strange menacing light and his shape wasn't the best, but energy still poured from all his pores.

In Cairo he had been helped by someone who convinced him of being a chosen one.

– Wasn't that man, by chance, called Dio? – asked Jotaro.

– Yes, Dio, his name was Dio. Or at least that's what Absalom called him, and so he kept saying before leaving the village.

«I have found a new deity in Cairo that has nothing to do with the civilised world. It's an almighty god Dio for whom I have a deep respect… That man has restored Michal's voice, thus fulfilling a wish of mine. I will owe him for the rest of my life. In the end, we survived thanks to him» he said.

By no means it sounded like a sane speech.

Michal's throat couldn't be cured by God. I suppose the organs that make the voice were completely removed. Just being alive is God's blessing.

The villagers are convinced this so-called Dio was either made up in Absalom's head or some terrible braggart.

...But I still admire him, whoever Dio is. Absalom has grown very fond of him and he restored his peace. He became Absalom's support. How could you blame him? Modern civilisation betrayed him, took away both his parents and almost his sister's voice as well. His morale was shattered, but some way or another he was able to make it thanks to that Dio that now has a place in his heart.

At that point, the old man's tale ended.

Jotaro and Polnareff, speechless, stared at the medicine shimmering at the bottom of the aluminium cups.

The bonfire's flames scattered all around.

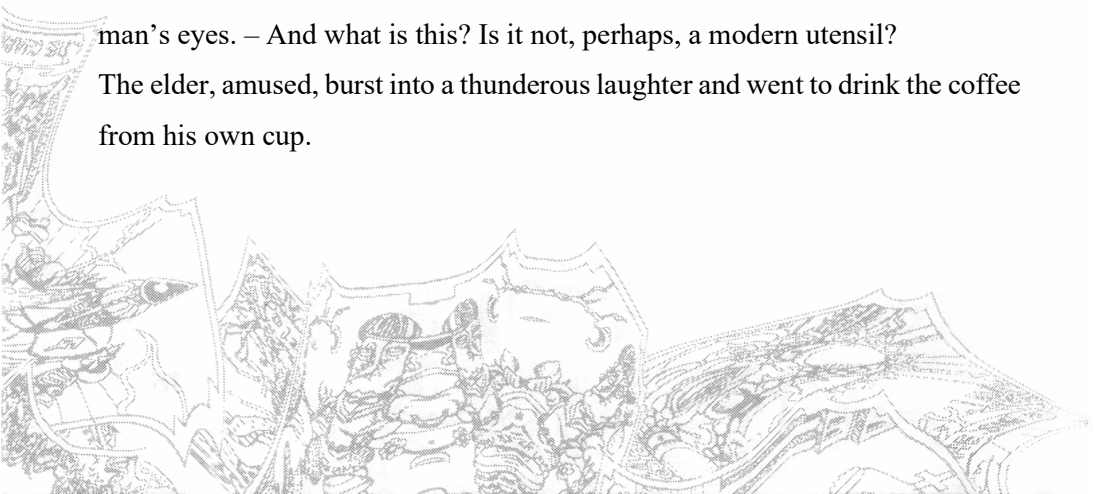
– Huff...

The old man sighed and began to speak again.

– It's not that I renounced progress, I simply have the feeling that people are poisoned by it. Naturally, you civilised men don't appreciate the desert and surely don't compare an oasis to a city, but this village and its people, in their own way, don't wish for the winds of modernity to blow here. I think that only those who ignore civilisation can be happy, and Absalom's tragedy is evidence of that.

– Nice speech – said Polnareff, holding out the aluminium cup before the old man's eyes. – And what is this? Is it not, perhaps, a modern utensil?

The elder, amused, burst into a thunderous laughter and went to drink the coffee from his own cup.



– Well, in truth it does not rust, it's unbreakable, and also handy, but I don't think this cup incarnates the worst side of civilisation.

– I get it, it's not corrupted enough. After all, it is yours – Polnareff added, making fun of him. – There's some theory which claims that the liquid that aluminium utensils release is a dangerous substance, probably the cause behind Alzheimer's.

– Alzheimer's? Never heard of it. But the medicine I made you drink also works on foreign diseases.

– I would like to believe it – Polnareff replied, humming.

Meanwhile the old man toyed with the aluminium cup between his hands, staring silently at the bonfire.

– Anyway… I was saying that in this world, those who ignore reality are the happiest. **If you don't want to spoil the desires you've grown in your hearts, might as well ignore reality and be happy anyway.**

– So, it could be anything? – said Polnareff with an interested look, making himself comfortable.

The old man turns his gaze to Jotaro. Then, letting an affectionate smile escape, he squeezed his hands tightly.

– Absalom has changed. I don't know if it'll please him to meet you civilised people, even if you're his friends. Whatever happens, I beg of you to forgive him, do it for me.

– Hmm…

– Even if he were to be unpleasant.

– We'll do what we can – Jotaro turned away from the old man's gentle smile.

In that moment, Absalom and Michal were hiding North of the oasis, and Satanic Coupler was finishing its umpteenth metamorphosis. Its metallic and

aerodynamic shape resembled the TGV-A, high velocity train of SNCF (the national French railway company) that on May 9th[4] of 1990 had achieved the speed world record, reaching the 515.3 kilometres per hour. Nowhere could the rough and angular features of the previous model be seen. It matched Absalom's aesthetic tastes. In fact, those sawed horns that protruded from the pilot and the sharp spines growing out of the convoy here and there had remained intact.

He moaned with a satisfied look.

– Thanks to you, Satanic Coupler has been revived in excellent shape, incarnating a latest model! – exclaimed Absalom, arrogantly turning to Joestar, Kakyoin, and Abdul. These remained attached to the ground, wrapped by tentacles which had still left their right hands free. And right in these, Michal, afraid, handed them a piece of cheese and a bowl of water.

– What are you up to?

Michal curled up, terrified by Joestar's intense look.

– We don't want to poison you – Absalom reassured him. – I've decided I'll let you live until tomorrow.

– What are you insinuating?

– Tomorrow I'm thinking of making you witness how Satanic Coupler will torture Jotaro and Polnareff to their deaths. A train journey to mark the end of their lives. The view from the car windows will have some changes. And naturally, after having some fun, we'll ask our guests to set out on a one-way

[4] T.N.: This seems to have actually happened on the 18th.

trip to Hell City.

At Absalom's maniacal laughter, Joestar and the others felt a shiver running down their spines.

– To make an attempt on the great Lord Dio's life is an extremely foolish act. Tomorrow I'll kill all you rotten civilised people. As a debt of gratitude to Lord Dio, and on behalf of Michal and myself.

– Do you believe so? – Abdul cut in, chuckling ironically. – That might be for you, but that girl besides you, Michal, doesn't look like she's too eager for tomorrow's event. At least, this is what my eyes see.

The girl was about to say something, but then she lowered her face, dejected.

– Quiet! Michal is my sister! Michal and I are a unit!

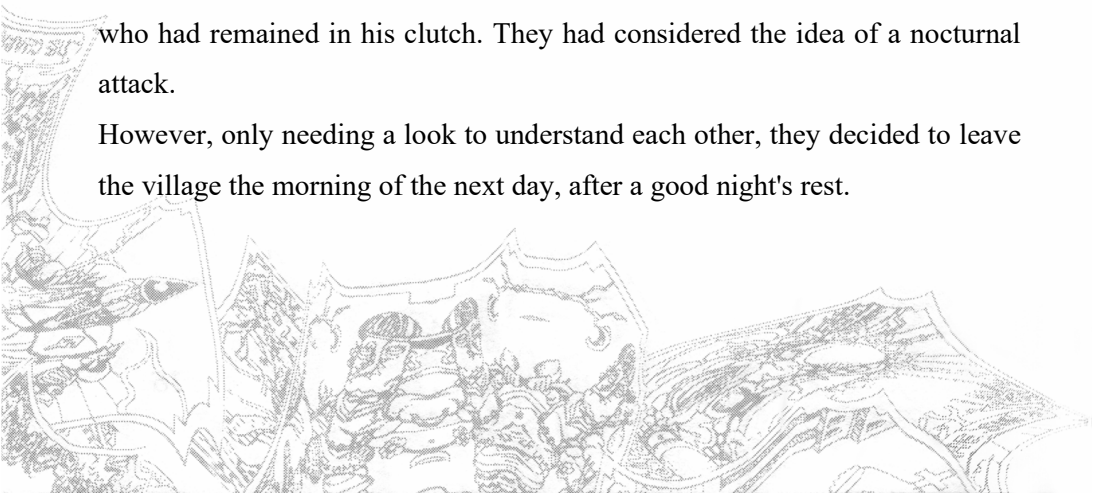
With that, Absalom dug his shoe tip into Abdul's side.

Absalom watched the coughing Abdul with hatred, but Michal, frail and frightened, didn't make any effort to raise her head.

In the evening, Michal's Stand couldn't manifest itself. There weren't any mirages on the horizon and, consequently, there wasn't even the possibility for her Stand to build mirage cities.

Meanwhile, Jotaro and Polnareff were focusing on what was the best strategy to take down Absalom once and for all and to rescue Joestar and the others, who had remained in his clutch. They had considered the idea of a nocturnal attack.

However, only needing a look to understand each other, they decided to leave the village the morning of the next day, after a good night's rest.



Even if they had recovered their physical and spiritual strength, it was just at sixty percent capacity. To be able to defeat Satanic Coupler one should have been at least at one-hundred percent of their physical condition. Joestar and the others were their main worry and the only way to rescue them was victory. Jotaro and Polnareff fell asleep in an old shed of coarse bricks, enraptured by a starry sky that invaded the place through a crack in the roof.

– The moment has come, but how will we save them? – asked Polnareff. – What's the plan, Jotaro?

– Dunno – replied Jotaro. – We'll talk about it as we go. The first move is to save grandpa and the others anyway.

– And after that?

– We'll improvise. It would be troublesome to be trapped inside but the outer wall of Satanic Coupler is pretty much the same as an ordinary Stand. In that case, we should be able to come up with something.

– The problem is, how are we going to get that guy into our Stands' range. Or better, how close we need to get. After all, for his size, he's a terribly fast-moving bastard.

– It'll be doable. So far we've managed to solve things as we go.

– You can say that again.

Silence reigned in that room for a few moments.

An instant later, Polnareff mumbled: – What do you think about what the old man said?

– What? – was Jotaro's sharp reply. – Ah, yeah... I think that both Absalom and Michal have probably received a Stand from Dio.

– No, I wasn't talking about that... Don't you find Absalom's story weird?

– How so?

– I mean, it's curious. Absalom should be mad at trains... After all, they killed his parents! Instead, would you look at that, he manipulates a diesel locomotive Stand. Rather, taking advantage of our brains he even enhanced it, scrupulously painting it like one of the latest models. No matter how you look at it, it's no different from a railroad enthusiast giving his train model a new coat of paint or using sandpaper to give it a glossy finish. Don't you think it's a big contradiction?

– In the end I suppose he never cast away his admiration for civilisation.

– What are you getting at?

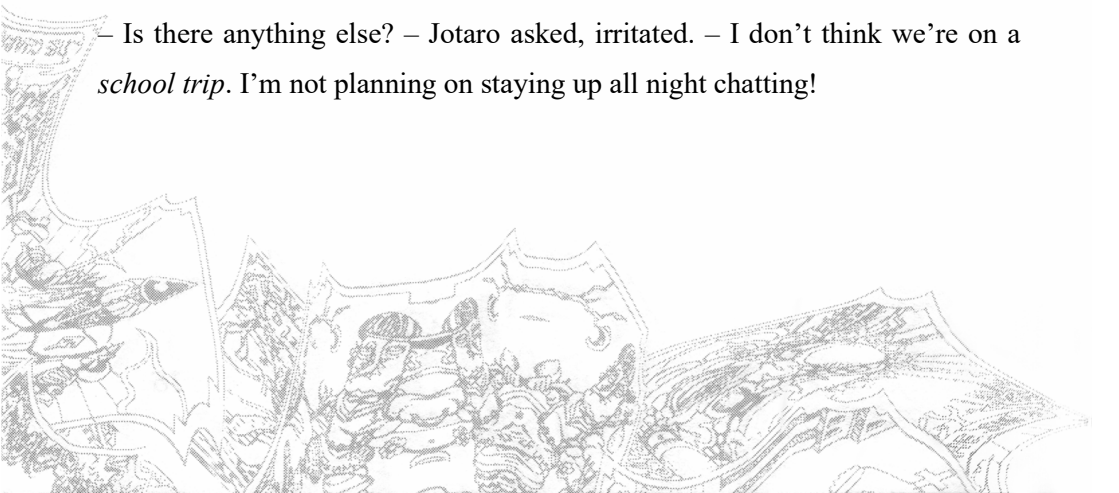
Polnareff sat up to scrutinize Jotaro, however the latter turned in bed and, annoyed, faced the other way – Surely what happened in Cairo must have been quite the trauma which changed his mindset. But his passion for trains didn't just fade. He both hates and loves civilization at the same time. Of course, it's a contradiction, but it's always his conscience. After all, it's a considerable psychological trauma, it's difficult to be coherent in these kinds of moments – he said.

– Without a doubt. It must have been hard, worse, he must suffer terribly.

Poor guy... I feel pity for him. Even if he's one of Dio's underlings, even if he's tried to kill us, ***I really do feel pity for Absalom*** thought Jotaro.

– Anyway – Polnareff said, yawning.

– Is there anything else? – Jotaro asked, irritated. – I don't think we're on a *school trip*. I'm not planning on staying up all night chatting!



– You're so irascible! This is the last thing, I swear... Actually, somewhere in the village I must have dropped my passcase. That's where I usually keep girls' phone numbers, so it'll be really bad if I can't find it.
– Whatever you say... – Jotaro brusquely got up and went outside.
In the sky shone a silvery moon while the desert embraced its reflection.
In Jotaro's heart a little mark of compassion for Absalom took form.
I hope this won't have an influence in the fight.
But no matter how much Jotaro stared at the desert lit by that silvery light, no reply came to placate that apprehension of his.

9

The morning sun coloured with silver the horizon line to the East. The desert released the humidity accumulated during the night in the air and a warm wind made the panorama waver slightly.
– Be careful, and on the way back make sure to come visit again! – the old man said, handing a leather sack containing water and dried meat to Jotaro and Polnareff.
– We won't fail to. And we will bring our three friends with us.
Turning their backs on the oasis, they resumed the trip. The desert was monotonous and desolate as always, but for Jotaro, Polnareff and Iggy, fully recovered, it no longer constituted a threat.
In two hours we'll be in the middle of a battlefield. And this battle will never end in a draw. For the losing side, there is only "death"...
While the vital energy began to flow inside their bodies, the three advanced towards North, where the oasis in which they would have found Absalom and Michal was. Fortunately, there wasn't any mirage in sight, they wouldn't appear

until the sun rose to some extent. Therefore, for a few hours after the sunrise there was no reason to worry about mirage cities. Of course, if the battle were to become drawn-out, the time when mirages can appear would arrive, but they settled that matter with "we'll get there when we get there". At the moment, the most important thing was to safeguard their own physical conditions, now that they were restored.

During the itinerary, Jotaro explained to Polnareff the plan of action he had elaborated the previous night.

– It's not a bad idea! Aiming at the train's coupler? Clever! – shouted Polnareff, after learning the strategy.

– The couplers are the pivot of the whole train. If we knock out that, the cars will drift apart from each other.

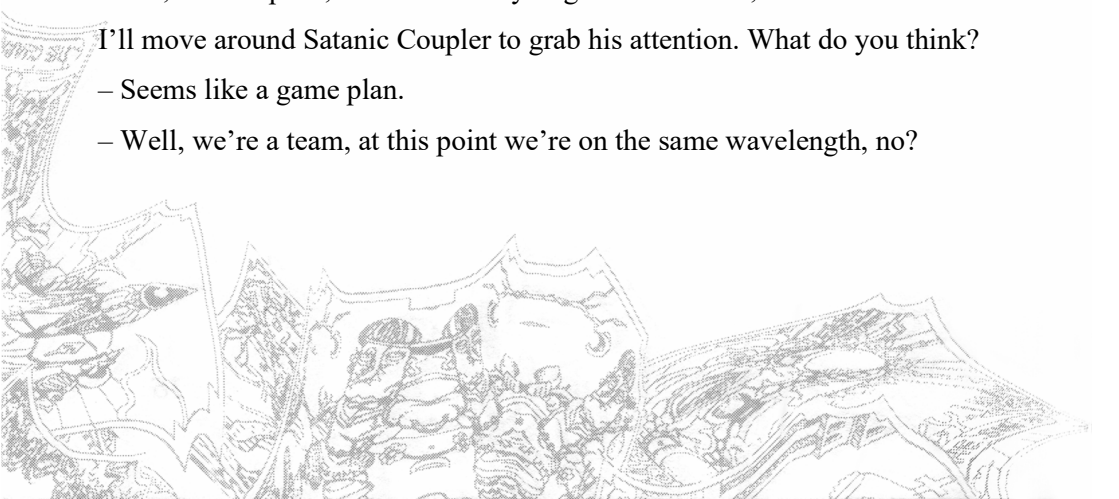
– This way, we'll split Satanic Coupler's locomotive from the passengers' car where Joestar and the rest are.

– I get it. But since those are fundamental parts, maybe Absalom has chosen really sturdy first quality components. We should give up the idea of destroying them by force. But in the remote hypothesis that the mechanism of the hook is the same as that of real trains, then Star Platinum should be able to intervene without any problem.

– But, at that speed, it won't be easy to get close. There, I'll make an entrance. I'll move around Satanic Coupler to grab his attention. What do you think?

– Seems like a game plan.

– Well, we're a team, at this point we're on the same wavelength, no?



Jotaro and Polnareff started mentally simulating the plan of action in every detail, while they continued to walk.

When they finished, their attention was grabbed by a cloud of dust that rose on the horizon in the distance.

– A sandstorm? I don't think so. Something's happening over there – Polnareff clenched his fists and became tense.

– A jeep? A Dune Buggy? No, that's not possible...

Whatever that was, it was loudly moving forward, lifting a cloud of sand.

An aerodynamic and metallic body. A hysteric siren hissing as much as it could. Headlights of a crazy red, and a pair of saw-toothed frontal pincers that opened and closed, making a terrible noise.

– But it's Satanic Coupler! – yelled Polnareff. – It has changed again! It goes a lot faster than earlier!

Polnareff's observation was correct. Satanic Coupler, beyond appearances, had been created by taking inspiration from the model and performance of the TGV-A. Its speed certainly exceeded 500 kilometres per hour.

– So you're still alive, Jotaro and Polnareff! I thought you would have hidden in some oasis in the South, taking advantage of your smart move the other day. Well, right today you'll be victims of my Satanic Coupler!

While the despicable and angered voice of Absalom boomed, Satanic Coupler charged in the direction of Jotaro, Polnareff and Iggy.

They managed to dodge it by a hair. However, Satanic Coupler's supersonic speed generated a shock wave, which hurled them high into the air like they had been hit by a giant invisible hand.

They landed sliding on the sand, and once again Satanic Coupler furiously charged against them. It was like a missile flying close to the ground.

The group quickly recovered, only to throw themselves to the side once more. A huge shock wave hit their backs, their clothes flapping violently, but they didn't suffer any damage.

Good! We avoided it. That shockwave is nothing to be afraid of.

Alright, time to put Polnareff's game plan into action!

The moment in which Jotaro thought that, he heard Polnareff's horrified scream.

– Aaaah! Look over there!

A young boy was standing, blocking the way of Satanic Coupler that was advancing at top speed in the desert.

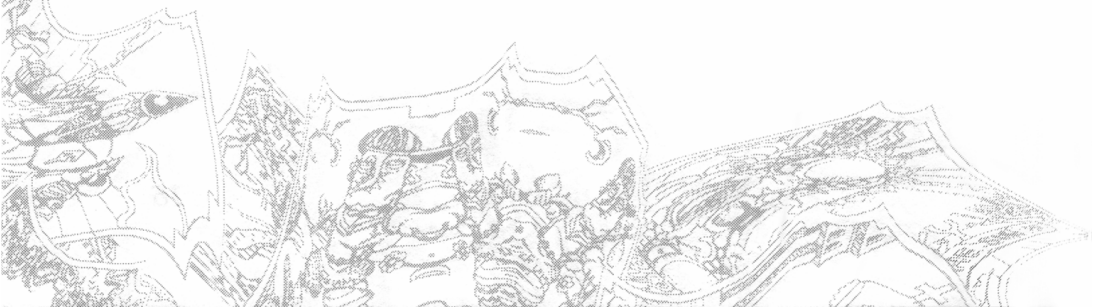
The boy opened his eyes wide, stunned and frightened.

– Watch out!

Just as Polnareff shouted, the boy was hurled by Satanic Coupler, so hard that Jotaro heard the thud. Absalom, disgusted, clicked his tongue and stopped Satanic Coupler diagonally. The boy twirled in the air like paper scraps and his blood started to fill the gashes dug by the wheels. From his hands bounced a black squared object that appeared to repeat the trajectory of the boy.

Jotaro and Polnareff approached in a hurry. From his lips spurted out a rivulet of blood, his eyes were rolled back into his head and he had heavy convulsions. That boy was **the Little Prince**, the one who had rushed to Jotaro's and his friends' aid the previous day.

– This... it's my passcase! – Polnareff whispered in shock, grabbing that square black object from the boy's hands. – This boy came all the way here just to give



it to me... – Polnareff glared furiously at Satanic Coupler, determined to deal with it at once, but the voice of Jotaro prevented him from doing so.

– Polnareff! Take this kid back to the village! He's in urgent need of medical care!

Polnareff stopped suddenly and, for a moment, hesitated between the bleeding boy and Satanic Coupler, which had atrociously altered his features.

– Come on! This Little Prince was our saviour!

His worrying condition left Polnareff no room for doubt.

– You go back, I'll fight to avenge him – he said without leaving any chance of reply.

– Fine, I got it, Jotaro... then at least try to hold out until my return!

Polnareff picked up the boy and began heading South towards the village. Jotaro followed him with his gaze until he slowly vanished on the horizon. Then he carefully got up, shaking off the sand from his knees.

The diesel engine of Satanic Coupler was idling, ready to charge at Jotaro and Iggy.

– This leaves a bad taste in my mouth, but I must turn back on my word. It's too bad, but it doesn't seem like the old man's wish will be fulfilled – muttered Jotaro with his eyes cast downward.

– What are you mumbling on about? Did the fear mess with your head? – Absalom's sneer filtered through the speakers of Satanic Coupler.

– Absalom, why do you do this? I heard that both of your parents died crushed by a train, you hate the modern world and you want to kill us. I don't exactly know why, but now I'll give you a good lesson! Answer me! Why do you act like this?

Jotaro lifted his head abruptly. It was as if a laser beam, sharp and blood-curdling as a flash of lightning, had released from his eyes and, crossing Satanic

Coupler's windscreen, pierced those of Absalom and Michal inside the driver's cabin. Michal was left petrified, with her gaze paralysed by fear, and Absalom immediately sat back down.

An intrepid fighting spirit with murderous intentions made its way into Jotaro's body.

– You bastard, you just pulled off the same accident that happened to your parents, the thing you hate the most. Worse, that kid isn't one of the civilised people you detest. He was one of *yours*.

– What are you insinuating? – said Absalom with insolence, through gritted teeth. – Who or what I hurt doesn't concern me. I don't belong to the civilised world, nor to the desert. Thanks to Lord Dio, we had the opportunity to embark on a journey into a third, new, world.

– And the destination is Hell City. There's not a single place in the world where you'll be able to catch your breath, except that.

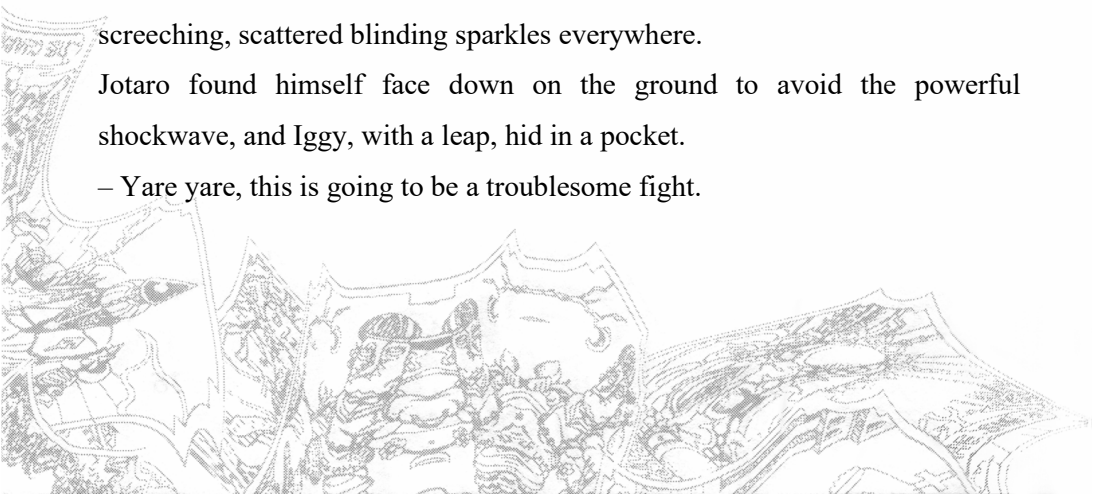
– What?! – the veins on Absalom's temples bulged.

Jotaro, spitting out the sand that got in his mouth, coldly replied. – I pity you a bit, but you made me get past it! You're the lowest of scum, you're a bastard and deserve to rot.

– Shut your mouth! Quiet, quiet, quiet, quiet, quiet! – Absalom, seized by a fit of wickedness, pushed the engine of Satanic Coupler to the max. The wheels, screeching, scattered blinding sparkles everywhere.

Jotaro found himself face down on the ground to avoid the powerful shockwave, and Iggy, with a leap, hid in a pocket.

– Yare yare, this is going to be a troublesome fight.



He watched Satanic Coupler turn around like a drifting car. It was clear that he was about to hunt them down again.

– Now that Polnareff isn't here, I can't carry out our game plan of damaging the coupler – Jotaro muttered dejected.

In that instant he saw the project he came up with the night before shattering into pieces.

And a plan B... **frankly said, it didn't exist.**

10

– Grrr... I'm seething, this is driving me up the wall! I'm just here watching my grandson in a crisis and there's absolutely nothing I can do about it! – Joestar blurted out, watching the scene from the window of Satanic Coupler.

– Awful – said Abdul, ardently clenching his fists dripping with sweat. – Jotaro's movements are getting slower and slower, while Satanic Coupler's attacks are meticulous.

Joestar and the others were still prisoners in the clutches of the tentacles, therefore it was impossible for them to freely move in the carriage.

Every time that Satanic Coupler reversed its direction, it brutally swung from right to left, and they were forced to hold onto the backs of the seats. They then carefully watched an imposing Jotaro who slowly consumed all of his energies, like watching a mouse being chased by a cat.

– Jotaro! Is Jotaro not trying to fight back?! – Kakyoin, without his sight, nearly found himself falling onto Joestar.

– No, Jotaro must have something in mind, he's attempting to somehow reach Satanic Coupler. The range of his Star Platinum is of two metres, but it will be

difficult for him to be that close. The spines coming out of the car will impede him.

– Is it that difficult, getting near this Satanic Coupler?

– Just think about it for a second! – Joestar said irked. – It's like a sumo match between a Shinkansen[5] and a human. Although you might have a Stand, don't you think it's a colossal challenge all the same to be able to jump on board of a running Shinkansen?

– Yes, there is no doubt... – Kakyoin stammered.

– Besides, not only does Satanic Coupler run *faster* than a Shinkansen, but it's also a hellishly terrifying machine that brings together the agility of a car during turns and the acceleration of a motorcycle. If Jotaro doesn't move away immediately, he'll get crushed.

– No way! – shouted Kakyoin. – Isn't there anything I can do, Mr Joestar?

– I've tried everything I can think of… but there's no way to escape! – Joestar hurled a violent fist against the window, but the glass, absorbing the shock, expanded stretching towards the exterior as if to mock his impatience.

In the meantime, Jotaro had fallen prey to restlessness, since he couldn't throw himself at Satanic Coupler. His uniform had begun to suffer gashes here and there and on his skin blood had started to spread. Every time he was about to toss himself near the train coupler, the quills that popped out from Satanic Coupler ripped through his body.

[5] High speed Japanese train.

Meanwhile, Iggy kept hidden in the spacious pocked of the school uniform, attempting to save his energies. For Jotaro there was no more time to lose, therefore he grabbed him by the scruff.

– You don't look well, eh, Jotaro? *Who* was the lowest kind of vermin? *Who* was the one supposed to go to Hell City? You're all bark and no bite, you only make me laugh!

He's stronger than an enraged bull, I won't be able to resist this brutal battle until Polnareff comes back... thought Jotaro as he listened to Absalom's insults.

Satanic Coupler, fuming like a bloodthirsty dragon, threw itself against Jotaro some ten times. Jotaro managed to avoid the attacks, but on the tenth time, due to fatigue, he got grazed on the side by one of the spikes and cried from the pain.

– Jotaro! – yelled Joestar.

Jotaro tumbled to the ground and rolled to the side.

Blood began to pour from his fingers and slowly the sand was tainted red.

Satanic Coupler kept speeding through the desert to deal the killing blow upon Jotaro and skidded into a large arched curve.

– Die, Jotaro!

Absalom turned the throttle to the max.

Satanic Coupler was now going at full speed, the pincers that protruded from the pilot spread wide.

Having exited the curve, Satanic Coupler's windshield caught a struggling Jotaro, trying to move away.

However...

A wide-eyed Absalom let out a small shriek.

There were two Jotaros.

Pressing the injured and bloodied side, a grimace of terrible pain appeared on their faces, but still with a sharp glint in the eyes the Jotaros scowled at Satanic Coupler, **standing side by side**.

– W-what's that?!

Absalom quickly turned his head right and left, looking at **the two Jotaros** alternatingly. However, **the two Jotaros** had the same characteristics and took the same stance. Still, the Jotaro on the right had somewhat funny-looking features but Absalom, confused, didn't notice that.

– Am I hallucinating? Have I gone mad?

Absalom looked at Michal, bewildered. She scrutinized the scene in front of her, terrified, with her doe eyes like dinner plates.

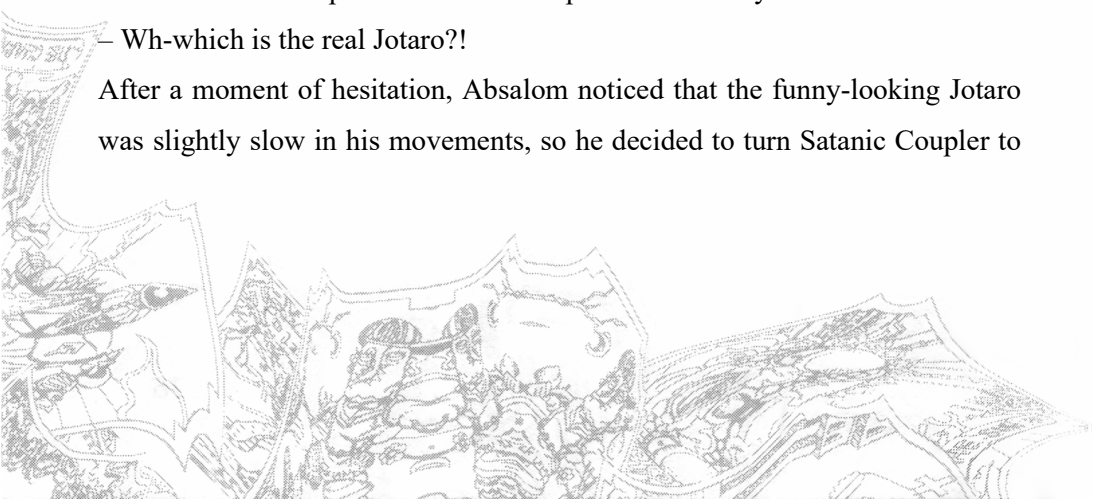
– If you see them too, it means it’s not an hallucination. But I’m one step away from victory, I can’t have hallucinations. It must be a trick... it must surely be another Japanese like Jotaro. Maybe he’s putting into practice the invisibility technique that apparently has been passed on in Japan since ancient times...

While Absalom became more and more perplexed, Satanic Coupler was quickly getting closer to **the two Jotaros**. They, in turn, started to run in opposite directions.

Absalom hadn’t still located the target, but unconsciously he pushed the pedal of the brakes. The speed of Satanic Coupler considerably decreased.

– Wh-which is the real Jotaro?!

After a moment of hesitation, Absalom noticed that the funny-looking Jotaro was slightly slow in his movements, so he decided to turn Satanic Coupler to



the right. At this point, the Jotaro on the left had complete freedom of action and certainly wouldn't let the only good opportunity in his life slip by.

He took a running start and with a supersonic dash he squeezed through the space between the locomotive and the passenger car. In the meantime the spikes completely destroyed the Jotaro on the right who, split in two, disintegrated releasing a cloud of sand into the air.

– But, that's the dog's Stand! – shouted a surprised Absalom.

The Jotaro on the right was Iggy's The Fool that, taking advantage of Absalom's momentary distraction, had taken the shape of Jotaro. Iggy usually didn't listen to humans' orders. He had an insolent soul, and only when his life was in serious danger did he devise an astonishingly clever plan. He was still a dog, but this was the reason which made Joestar want to bring him along in the journey. Now, with this action, he had wonderfully proved his true abilities.

Many thanks, Iggy. Later I'll give you as much coffee chewing gum as you want, your favourite.

In the meantime Jotaro had slipped into the precarious intercommunicating space between the locomotive and the passenger car, and there he had manifested his Star Platinum. Satanic Coupler's coupler was in the immediate vicinity. The eyes of Star Platinum had rapidly located the mechanical device of the coupler. It didn't differ much from those of the original trains and the individual parts had been assembled with some bolts.

It's like I thought. Normally it would be difficult, but with the ultraprecise movements of Star Platinum it will be a piece of cake to take them apart, Jotaro evaluated.

Therefore he ordered Star Platinum to unscrew the four bolts from the coupler, then it didn't take much for Jotaro to jump on the other side.

Pulling out the four bolts, the coupler of Satanic Coupler broke down, separating the locomotive from the passenger car. From the speaker arose the desperate screams of Absalom.

The locomotive of Satanic Coupler stopped with a turnabout. On the opposite side there was the passenger car in which were Joestar and the others, and that had drifted apart from the locomotive, changing appearance.

At this point it wasn't a Stand anymore, it was rather like a lizard that had its tail cut off.

In a flash it disappeared, leaving behind an amalgamation of steel beams, Joestar, Abdul, and Kakyoin.

– Jotaro!

Joestar and the others, smiling and amazed, rushed towards Jotaro, who was supporting himself on the sand with his hands, panting.

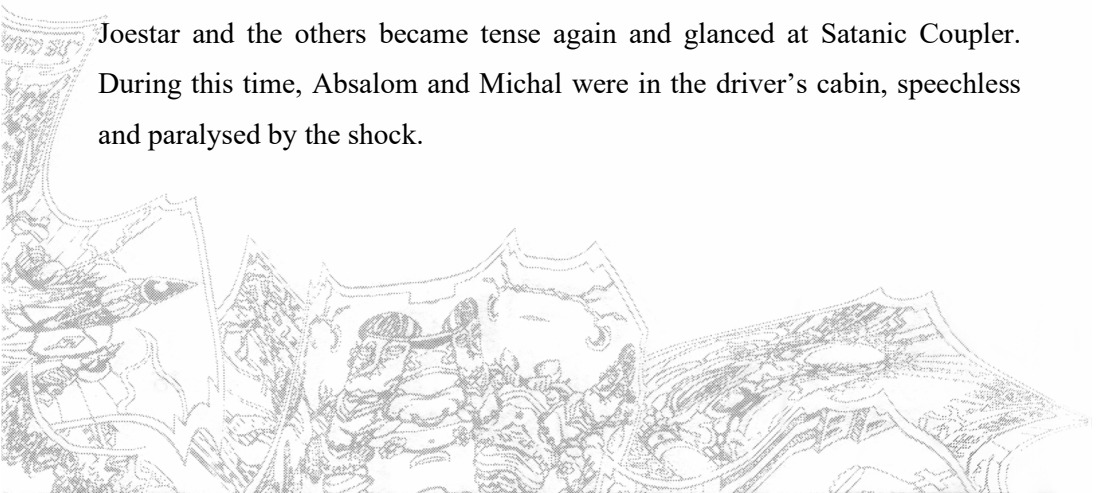
– You saved us, Jotaro! – said Abdul. – It was an outstanding battle!

– I am amazed beyond words. I would have never thought about such a sly move. You're really my grandson, in you flows the blood of the Joestar family.

Joestar rubbed his cheek against Jotaro's.

– You know I can't stand these speeches, grandpa! – said Jotaro, roughly pushing him away. – And it's not over yet! Absalom and Michal are in perfect shape!

Joestar and the others became tense again and glanced at Satanic Coupler. During this time, Absalom and Michal were in the driver's cabin, speechless and paralysed by the shock.



– He got helped by the dog for a second time. Now I've finally understood... that piece of trash is worth less than that animal. Ah ah ah... – said Absalom with a hoarse voice.

Pale and damp with sweat, he had been hit in the nape by the four bolts that Star Platinum had unscrewed.

– Michal... you have to use Dark Mirage! – he said with a loud voice without stemming the blood that was spilling from his wounds.

Michal's body trembled as if suffering an electrical shock.

– Activate it! I said, activate your Dark Mirage! Then get off the train and deal with those bastards!

Michal took one or two steps back, in her eyes you could read a slight perplexity. Absalom gripped her by the shoulders and shouted desperately: – So, did you hear me or not, Michal?! We can't reconcile with the desert anymore, nor with the civilised word. There's no more shelter for us on earth. There's no other place where we can live except the new world that Lord Dio has created for us. We have to kill them now, we have to show our devotion to Lord Dio, or there won't be any future for us...

Absalom's honest look got lost in Michal's watering eyes.

She silently nodded.

Right in that instant the mirages started to appear on the horizon.

The vital energy of Dark Mirage slowly flowed inside Michal's body.

In the sky echoed a rumble similar to that of a jet formation. On the desert, instead, a rain of objects seemed to want to encircle Jotaro and his friends. They immediately paled, but at that point the **materialising mirage parts** had filled the sky.

Huge cylindrical petroleum cisterns, factories, an entire office district, chimney stacks... a **swarm of parts** that rained down consecutively from the sky, following the same pattern of the previous day.

Even this time, logic was not taken into consideration, and this made possible the realisation of a large-scale industrial zone, in which ended both Satanic Coupler and Jotaro and his friends. The oblique chimney stacks, the capsized factories, and the piled-up oil cisterns, however, didn't bother their souls anymore. A nightmare like that would have put to test the psychological stability of anyone and, after all, the role of the mirage-city was exactly that of pushing men on the brink of madness. But by now, having discovered the trick, there wouldn't have been the same psychological consequences of last time.

The mirage-city was Satanic Coupler's battlefield, but that irrational aspect didn't constitute an insurmountable obstacle for Jotaro and his friends anymore.

– We should think about some countermeasure – said Joestar, confident. – Don't forget that Satanic Coupler is able to enter buildings. They are upside down, sure, but they are still buildings. It will be easier to fight if we bring this into a world where we can use some common sense.

Jotaro and the others, in agreement with Joestar's words, fled towards the industrial area, and once there, began to patrol the surroundings.

In the meantime Satanic Coupler, not following their tracks, brought to the max the diesel engine.

– Let's begin... – he said with an evil sneer.

11

Once he took the injured boy to the village, Polnareff headed over one more time to the battlefield, and having reached less than a kilometre away, he noticed the mirage-city.

– Shit! It appeared again!

In less than ten minutes he had already reached the border. Looking at it that way, from the desert, he felt yet again how unnatural it was. He had the exact same feeling from when he met Satanic Coupler in the sandstorm, and namely that it had been taken and put there, incoherently, without any correlation and balance towards the neighbouring scenery.

And that exact feeling was, as it had been for Satanic Coupler, the irrefutable proof of how much the mirage-city was a trap. But even if aware, it couldn't be avoided. Polnareff, without hesitation, rushed inside the city. It was silent and gloomy, almost as a tomb. This caused a big sense of apprehension in Polnareff.

Is Jotaro okay? And Joestar and the others? If they're alive, where are they? Is the battle over? If it isn't, where are they fighting?

A thousand doubts crossed Polnareff's mind without an answer. The only certain thing was that the mirage-city existed, but this would also mean that the girl Michal was still alive.

– Jotaro! Jotaro! – he yelled at the top of his lungs. His voice ricocheted emptily, losing itself in that industrial area unconcerned by any construction rules, almost like they had been wooden blocks piled up by a kid.

– Jotaro! Mr Joestar! Kakyoin! Abdul!

Repeatedly calling the names of his companions, Polnareff turned the corner of a factory built with its roof below. In that instant his step halted suddenly.

On the road there was a tremendous quantity of blood, so much that a puddle had formed. The blood hadn't still dried out, therefore it should have been fresh. Polnareff didn't know if it belonged to the enemy or his companions. The fact remained, however, that whoever had lost that pool of blood, had moved with an ongoing hemorrhage. The stains on the path, indeed, signalled that they were heading towards the entrance of the gatehouse.

Polnareff shattered the door with a kick and entered the building.

The spots passed through the corridor, climbed up the stairs and reached the second floor, and then continued again through the hallway. Polnareff followed them while looking around carefully. At some point, in front of a door at the end of the corridor, the stains disappeared. The handle was soiled with blood though.

Polnareff rotated the handle and slowly opened the door.

The room seemed an abandoned conference hall.

The foldable chairs and the tables of a meeting had been placed in a corner.

All four windows were open and the curtains, floor length, gently hit against the frames, moved by the wind. The horizon line from which started the mirage appeared there in the foreground, without buildings and chimney stacks obstructing the view. The stains formed again a puddle at the centre of the room, but then stopped. Polnareff hurried towards that pool of blood and was left dumbfounded.

– Wha-what's the meaning of this? Did the bleeding guy just disappear from here?

He looked around but there wasn't anyone, only the curtains that lightly moved because of the wind.

Polnareff clenched his fists, perplexed. He then felt his palm was slippery, from the blood that stuck to it when he grasped the door handle.

He looked at the blood on his palm.

This is… not blood. This is a red paint terribly similar to blood.

– Damn! It's a trap!

The moment in which Polnareff uttered this frantic scream, a myriad of shining lights started to whirl in the mirage visible from outside the window.

– Aaaaah!

It was a **series of new mirages that were materialising. Countless petroleum cisterns were materialising.**

– Is this the work of Michal!? Is it her Stand **making new city parts?!**

Without a doubt, it was all the work of Michal's Stand, Dark Mirage. There was only a small detail: Michal **didn't use the petroleum cisterns as new parts of the city. She used them as a weapon.**

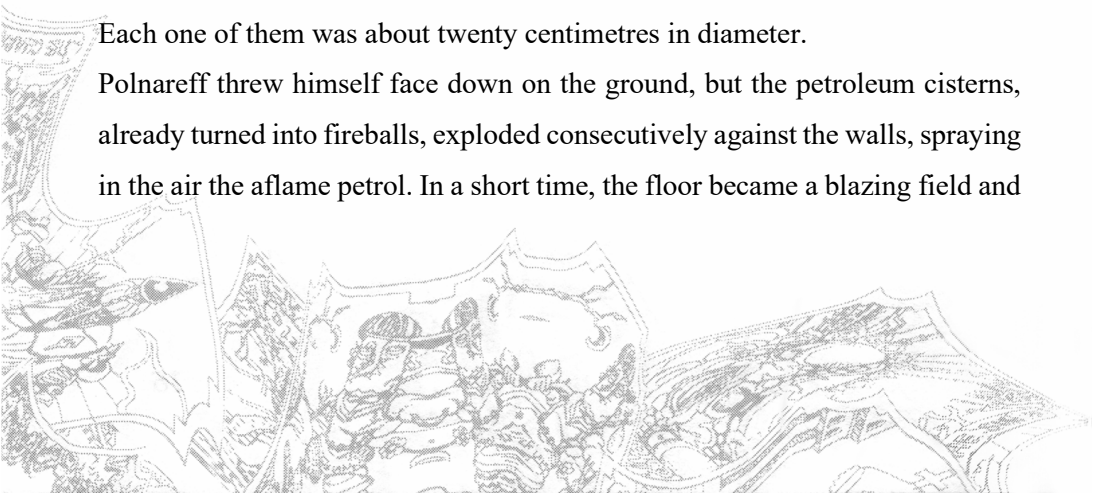
The petroleum cisterns whirled at high speed towards the mirage-city, beginning to burn bright red from the friction with the atmosphere.

And then, unbelievably, the burning cisterns ran through the four windows of the conference room, one after the other, attacking Polnareff like a meteor shower.

– Gwaah!

Each one of them was about twenty centimetres in diameter.

Polnareff threw himself face down on the ground, but the petroleum cisterns, already turned into fireballs, exploded consecutively against the walls, spraying in the air the aflame petrol. In a short time, the floor became a blazing field and



Polnareff, trying to dodge the threat of the fireballs, came to a point where he couldn't move anymore.

He was at the centre of a pyre.

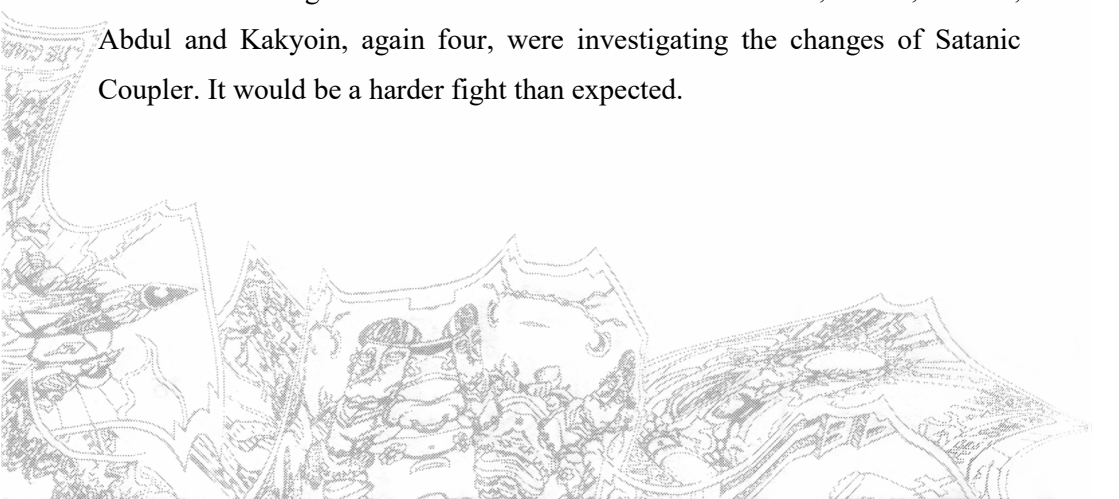
– A-am I dreaming this? Just the **materialising mirages** are a nightmare but even the size of them… it's so incoherent!

Dark Mirage was apparently able to freely modify the mirages' scale when they materialised. Of course, in the case of teleportation or telekinesis, the weight and dimensions of the objects involved cannot be modified. However, Dark Mirage's ability is **to materialise objects that do not exist in reality**, that is, the mirages. Since they don't really exist, Michal can change them at will, and their size was at her discretion.

When Polnareff noticed the flock of spinning cisterns in the mirage it was too late, at this point the fireballs had broken through the four windows of the conference hall, hitting the target. They blasted away energetically, chasing through every corner of the room after Polnareff, who in vain searched for an escape route from that hell. One of them exploded right above his head.

His face was drenched in a huge quantity of fuel. Just the time of emitting a sharp cry of pain and then he turned into a human torch.

When Polnareff got himself into this irremediable trouble, Jotaro, Joestar, Abdul and Kakyoin, again four, were investigating the changes of Satanic Coupler. It would be a harder fight than expected.



They were now one building away from Polnareff, at the third floor of a factory management building, stuck in the middle of a two hundred metres long corridor.

The shape of Satanic Coupler couldn't be found anywhere, but with its unreal speed it had been able to inflict wounds to all four of them anyway, with the needles that protruded from the surface. Among other things, the injury to Joestar's left arm was particularly deep, but it wasn't spilling blood. It spilt oil. That arm had Joestar's artificial hand.

– Damn, I can't move the index. The mechanisms must have been damaged. Now how will I blow my nose?

– Shhh! Listen! It's coming again! – said Kakyoin interrupting the words of Joestar.

The hollow and deep sound seemed that of a subway inside a tunnel. Jotaro and the others, standing stiff, started focusing carefully.

– It's coming, it's coming – murmured Joestar, damp with sweat. – But from where...?

Satanic Coupler knocked down the walls and swung vociferously. It was exactly ten metres behind Jotaro and the others and, as a reflex, they leapt forward.

– Emerald Splash!

Kakyoin, staggering from the force of the attack, released Hierophant Green, which in turn emanated from its wrists a flurry of destructive energy made of emeralds. But those scattered in the air.

Satanic Coupler, after crossing the hallway, had dug a tunnel in the opposite wall with its horns, and, bolting at the speed of 500 kilometres per hour, had gone through it, dodging the attack and leaving intact its metallic convoy.

It all happened in the blink of an eye. Satanic Coupler's twenty metres of length crossed the less than ten metres wide corridor, rather than running along it. The train went from one tunnel to another, and crossing the two holes dug in the walls to resurface, managed to travel the whole hallway in a tenth of a second. Like this all the attacks of Jotaro and his companions inexorably ended up lost in the air. Satanic Coupler, instead, in that split second was able to launch any attack. Rather, it was sufficient for it to move into their direct proximity to run over them.

– Mmm... We must be quick to avoid it. It's too dangerous, it's better not to take reckless decisions – said Joestar breaking out in a cold sweat.

– Wasn't it you, grandpa, who said it's easier to fight if you bring this into a world where you can use common sense? Tell me, what do you call common sense about this? – said Jotaro.

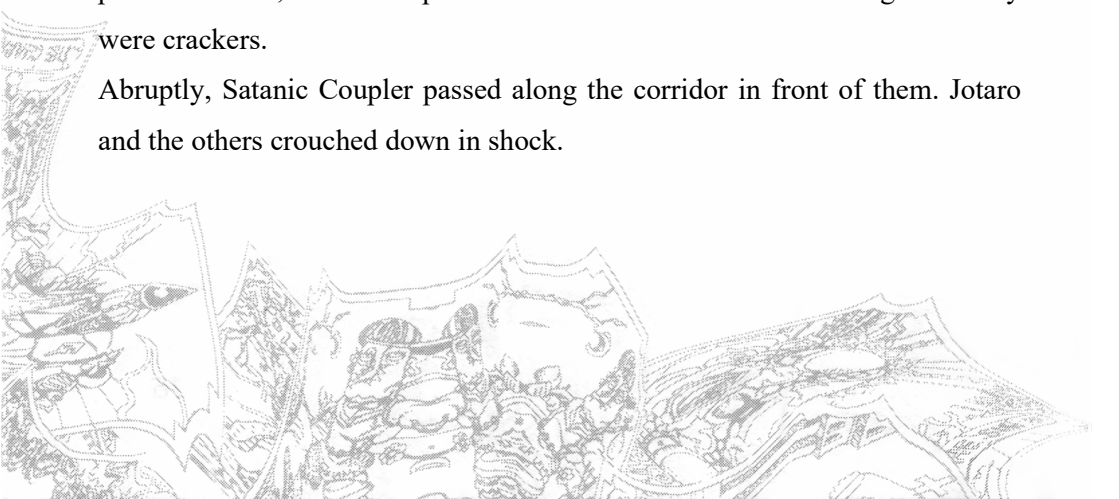
– The buildings themselves are magnificently common sense! – replied Joestar, facing Jotaro. – What's irrational is that guy who's perfectly digging through the corridor. Don't tell me he's using the front horns for it...

– Did you think really that those things were only useful to intimidate us?

– Why, what do you think?! – yelled Joestar, losing his temper.

– Anyway, it is running at a supersonic speed and, using the horns as a pneumatic drill, it blows to pieces the walls of the concrete buildings as if they were crackers.

Abruptly, Satanic Coupler passed along the corridor in front of them. Jotaro and the others crouched down in shock.



– It was a mistake to come to this hallway – said Abdul. – With this width, if it shows up right next to us, we can't avoid it. We should remain in wide spaces.
– Sorry – Joestar lowered his gaze apologetically. – This was all my idea. I never thought he'd break through the walls to attack us. In a corridor we would only need to watch the front and back while quickly run--
– It's coming back! – yelled Kakyoin, interrupting Joestar's sentence.
Satanic Coupler kept running impetuously like an enraged bull. Once more, it leapt out from the walls, ending up just right in front of the eyes of Jotaro and his friends.
Kakyoin was disfigured by one of his quills.
In a heartbeat a myriad of fierce flames scattered out of Magician's Red's mouth, but these didn't even reach Satanic Coupler, protected by its shock wave.
– Kakyoin, everything alright? – asked Jotaro, rushing to his aid.
– It's just a scratch. We're trapped like rats. We'll end up being hit, we have to get out of this hallway quickly.
– But... – said Joestar. – the rooms on the side of the corridor are much narrower than the corridor itself. It would be even more dangerous.
– I get it. Then we need to leave this corridor and flee towards a wider space.
– Exactly, even if after that it would be even more risky! Once we start running, we should be very careful, even the smallest sound of steps could be fatal to us. After all, dodging it is impossible!
– Well, where do we start? – shouted Kakyoin. – This city won't vanish until dusk, do you think we will be able to resist and avoid it until that moment?
– Hey, but what...? – Joestar lost his voice for an instant.
Satanic Coupler, with a deafening noise, swept past about fifty metres away from them.

– Abdul... – began Jotaro. – Do you think he's attacking to pinpoint our location?

– Now that you mention it, the attacks seem to lack accuracy – replied Abdul.

– Too many useless charges. Maybe he's doing it on purpose to torment us, but does he even have the ability to see through walls? "Even a poor marksman will hit the target with enough shots" so there's a high chance he's just randomly charging over and over again.

– I've decided. There's only one way to escape.

Joestar and the others became serious, waiting for Jotaro to finish his phrase.

– Let's run... hoping we won't bump into him!

– Wha-?! Are you crazy?! – Joestar, head in his hands, signalled a no.

– There's no time to argue. The probability that it will run us over is high!

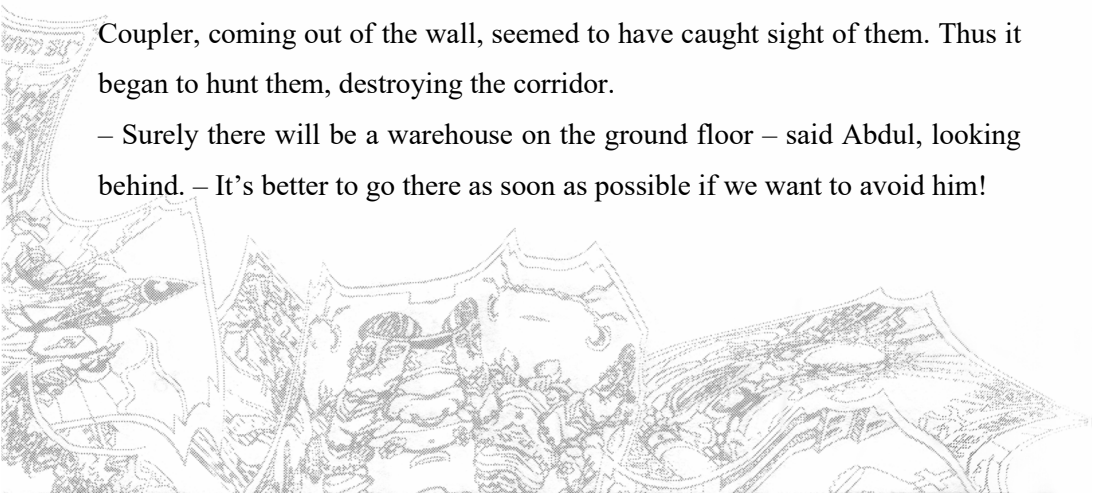
Jotaro, from the floor, sprang into action and started running with all he had. Joestar and the others followed suit.

Satanic Coupler zoomed through the place where the group had stood up until then, disappearing through the wall.

– That was close.

In the meantime the group, trying to keep their cool while Satanic Coupler rushed through the corridor multiple times, ahead and behind them, managed to run through the hundred or so metres and reach the stairwell. Satanic Coupler, coming out of the wall, seemed to have caught sight of them. Thus it began to hunt them, destroying the corridor.

– Surely there will be a warehouse on the ground floor – said Abdul, looking behind. – It's better to go there as soon as possible if we want to avoid him!



They ran down the stairs and rushed straight to the storehouse.

– Only by avoiding him we will be able to calmly find a solution – said Kakyoin.

– I wish we could stop him, even for a moment... – mumbled Jotaro.

– Why do you say this, Jotaro? – responded Joestar after hearing his words.

– If he stopped, even for a second... **I could defeat him with Star Platinum**.

– What?! Think before you open your mouth! – Joestar shouted loudly.

12

– Silver Chariot!

Polnareff, with his body half engulfed in flames, mustered his last breath of vital energy left and freed Silver Chariot into the air. This one, in turn, suddenly drew his sword, aiming the tip towards Polnareff, began shaking it brushing against him.

The sabre's flare painted a shiny arch around Polnareff, and abruptly, the flames that were enveloping him moved away. Silver Chariot, adhering to Polnareff's body, collapsed to the ground without hurting him.

– Hahahah... My swordsman is truly wonderful.

The consequences on Polnareff's physique were enormous: half of his body was burnt, and even his silver hair, of which he was rather proud, had been dramatically scorched. However, he didn't have time to catch his breath, since the oil cisterns still whirled in the mirage beyond the window and were about to launch the third and fourth wave of attacks.

– Hey, give me a break!

Silver Chariot, standing in front of Polnareff, was concentrically swinging its sabre like a windmill against the attacks of the mini-cisterns. Some of them exploded and, with the spurts of petrol, nourished the sea of flames.

The conference hall began to be enveloped in black smoke.

I must stay calm... thought Polnareff. *My safety is in Silver Chariot's hands, but I must think about countermeasures in any case.*

First, the Stand's position: I absolutely have to find where Michal is. I'm unable to attack when I don't know where the enemy is.

Are there no traces? Any particular hint that might reveal the position of Michal's Stand?

Nothing at all, there isn't anything anywhere.

Well, then I will have to figure it out by the characteristics of Michal's Stand.

The things I know about her Stand are three, it possesses the power of ***making mirages tangible****; it can't operate without the mirages; and lastly, it can't operate if the mirage is not visible to the naked eye from its position, for example like when we were in the sandstorm.*

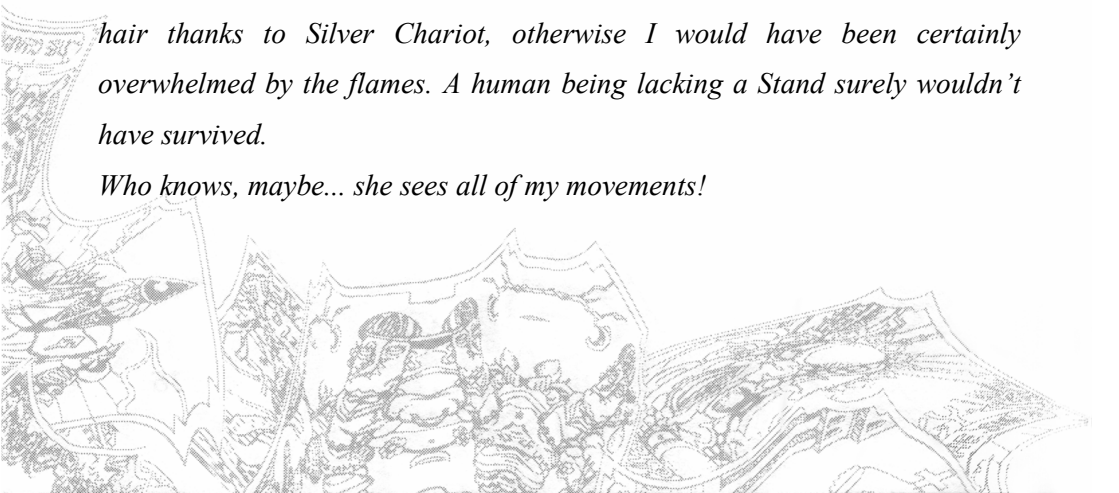
Therefore, excluding the first and the second, we're left with the third. The mirage can be visible from any place, outside and inside the city. I can't comb through corner-to-corner, even because it would be hard to get out of this burning room. The door is already covered in flames.

But… there's one strange thing that has been bothering me for a while now.

Which is why I haven't left this room yet.

The aim of the oil cisterns that attacked me is incredibly good. I survived by a hair thanks to Silver Chariot, otherwise I would have been certainly overwhelmed by the flames. A human being lacking a Stand surely wouldn't have survived.

Who knows, maybe... she sees all of my movements!



Yeah, but where is she watching from?

Definitely not from outside. Outdoors there's an infinity of mirages, and with the skyscrapers and the dark smoke she wouldn't really be able to discern the movements here inside.

Then... she must be somewhere in this room.

Where, where?! She can see me with the naked eye, so there must be a spot from where she's also able to pick up the mirages.

– Ooohhhh!

After having analysed the interior of the room, Polnareff suddenly fixed his gaze. His eyes had become stuck to the left side of one of the four windows. The curtain attached to the framework didn't flutter. The others flapped like crazy, fed by the flames. Over there, instead, it seemed there was a person.

– There she is!

Silver Chariot, together with Polnareff, unsheathed its sword with a dash and, dodging the flames, pointed it towards the curtain.

Well, there was something. Polnareff actually felt Silver Chariot brush a body with its sword…

While they were hearing the insane roar of the wheels, Jotaro and the others carried on with their dash towards the warehouse.

– Do we really have a plan? Because if we stopped him for a second, I could destroy Satanic Coupler!

– You still insist?!

– We will never be able to attack it this way. When he stops, the shockwave also disappears. It's pretty straightforward. Besides, old man, you can be the one to stop him. – added Jotaro, annoyed at Joestar's reply.

– Gotcha. Trains push their wheels against the track with their own weight, which causes friction for them to run. We need to get rid of that friction.

– Anything's fine, your old man cunning should come up with something.

– Leave it to me, we won't fail a second time!

From Abdul's shoulders emerged Magician's Red half bust, that fuelled its flames against the iron door of the warehouse. When it ended up liquified, Jotaro and the others rushed inside, scattering left and right, letting Satanic Coupler pass through, since it had followed their trails.

After rushing along for fifty metres, Satanic Coupler broke into a sharp curve, swerving around the group in circles, surrounding them.

– Let's not escape, let's stay here!

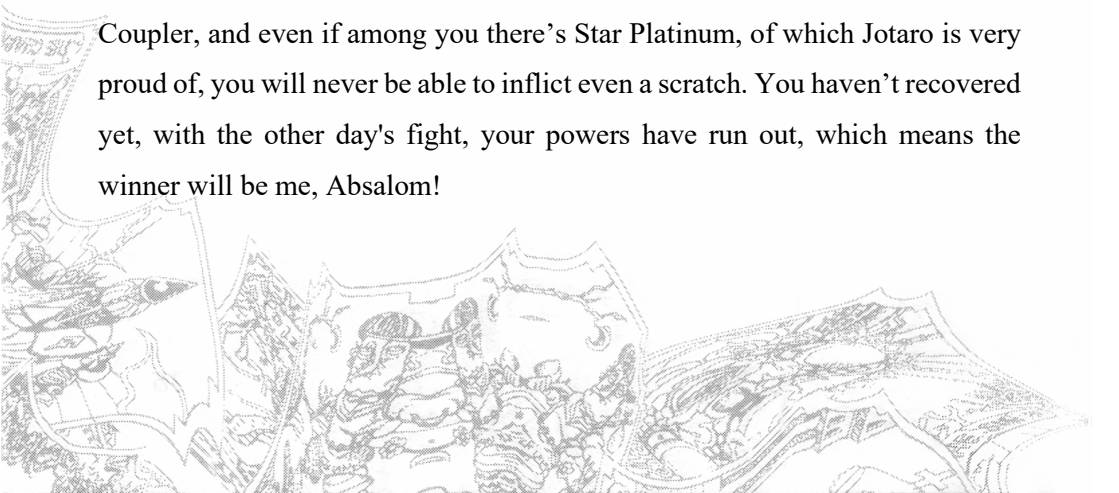
Following Joestar's indications, Jotaro and the others didn't move any further, but turned their backs to each other to form a circle and prepare themselves for Satanic Coupler's attack.

Little by little the diameter narrowed and it got closer and closer to them, but they continued to remain still. The next move, whatever it was, would be crucial: they needed to calmly wait for Satanic Coupler's arrival.

– And so you all dug your own graves!

From the speaker echoed Absalom's sombre voice.

– I warned you, your Stand's attacks aren't worth a thing in the face of Satanic Coupler, and even if among you there's Star Platinum, of which Jotaro is very proud of, you will never be able to inflict even a scratch. You haven't recovered yet, with the other day's fight, your powers have run out, which means the winner will be me, Absalom!



Suddenly, Satanic Coupler cut inward at a steep angle, launching the attack on the group, which quickly dispersed in all directions.

– Move! He's not giving up!

Satanic Coupler entered in a turnabout, sliding on the floor. On impulse, Joestar freed Hermit Purple with its thorny vines from his left wrist, and deliberately let it envelope his arm, which ended up being severed at the elbow's height.

At this point the artificial arm had been snapped in half.

– Mr Joestar! What have you done?! – cried Abdul.

– I didn't enjoy the humiliation of being a prisoner without doing anything. This is the result of one night of thinking!

Satanic Coupler re-entered with a turnabout.

Its wheels lost power and a moment later halted completely.

– Now!

Joestar hurled towards it the artificial arm, dripping with oil. This got caught in the gap between the front wheels and the rails, and the huge amount of oil strewn across the tracks wound up getting splattered in an instant by Satanic Coupler's rush.

With a screech, the front wheels were out of order and the evaporated oil caused a white smoke.

Jotaro and the others opened their eyes wide.

Joestar's move had an amazing effect. While Satanic Coupler's engine ran at full throttle, the wheels were skidding on the oil, bringing it to a full stop.

– Well, regarding my artificial arm, it's packed full of a macromolecular synthetic oil recently developed by the Speedwagon Foundation, of which I'm an advisor. The quality of this lubricating oil is the best in the world!

Joestar looked at Jotaro straight in the eyes.

– Then, what do you propose, Jotaro?

– I'm going to beat the shit out of him… that's enough for me! – Jotaro said with complete frankness.

– *Oh, no!* My grandson is so simple-minded!

Leaving Joestar to struggle with this let-down, Jotaro hurried towards Satanic Coupler, shouting at the top of his lungs.

In response, Star Platinum was released, its eyes anticipating a bloodbath. The two fists, in a flash, concentrated a pale vital energy.

– Why, why is Satanic Coupler not moving?! Why?!

Disregarding Absalom's confused state, Star Platinum went around to Satanic Coupler's side.

Then, it struck with all it had, like machine gun shots, aiming at the underside where all the engine components were exposed.

– ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORAAAA!

The flurry of fists emanated an incredible destructive energy, that precisely hit the target, pulverising everything that gave form to Satanic Coupler.

– I get it now! – shouted Abdul. – Animal or machine, no matter how much pride they take in their armour of steel, the underside is always surprisingly fragile: stag beetles, hedgehogs, and diesel locomotives as well. Jotaro's plan is simple and effective!

– ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORAAAA!

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Star Platinum didn't give up and toppled Satanic Coupler on its side to better launch its storm of blows. It threw the fists on the exposed lower part and did its best to destroy everything without leaving any trace of the original shape.

– Ooooooraaaaaaa!

A cry, then Star Platinum, fearlessly leaning backwards, hit the exact centre of the lower part of Satanic Coupler.

Along the whole train convoy cracks started to appear, then the siren echoed with a yell.

Jotaro and the others, stunned, watched Satanic Coupler shatter into one thousand pieces, disappearing bit by bit.

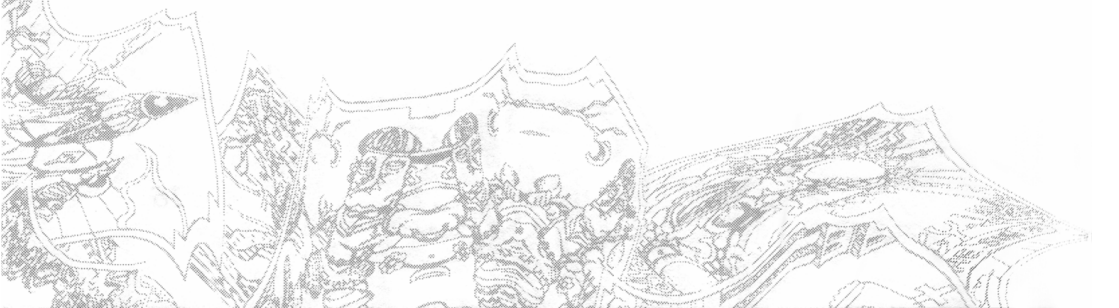
In the meantime, hidden behind the curtain of the conference hall, Michal had been struck by a single blow from Silver Chariot's sabre and fallen on the floor. Alongside Michal's defeat, even the imposing mirage-city dissolved in the desert like a cloud...

13

Six men, a woman and a dog were lying on the sand that glistened bright under the sunlight.

Every single one of them had been injured.

Jotaro, Joestar, Abdul, Kakyoin and Iggy had lacerations on the whole body. Polnareff had an awful burn on his chest and Michal, fallen face down, was



completely immobile. Absalom, instead, bruised and with multiple bone fractures, was vomiting blood from his mouth.

At this point the match had ended. Jotaro and the others abruptly got up, while Absalom wasn't able to even lift his chest. His eyes were bloodshot, he hadn't yet realised he had been defeated. His face darkened by dejection, wrath and hatred had a ghastly look, he seemed another person.

– Good... good, Michal! Kill them all, come on...

– This is the last stop for you – said Polnareff. – The game has ended. You don't even have energy left to break a toothpick.

– Really, is that so? – sneered Absalom breaking into a cold sweat. – Do you really think you defeated us? We will stop fighting only when our hearts stop beating.

– Well, if you want we can help you with that.

Polnareff called Silver Chariot again.

In that moment he noticed that the minuscule light emanating from Absalom's body was doing something to Abdul's wounded calf.

– Hey, you! What the heck are you doing?!

Polnareff grabbed Absalom and raised him by the head.

– Huhuhuhuh... – Absalom laughed brazenly – Satanic Coupler. I sent into Abdul's body a microscopic Satanic Coupler. I told you that it's a Stand that acts by combining itself with matter. If it's combined with airborne particles it can get very tiny.

– What?!

Polnareff and the others went serious, but then relaxed once more. Absalom, without being aware, kept blabbering proudly of his victory.

– The human body is structured like an underground with many tunnels, which in this case are called blood vessels. I tested this new Satanic Coupler for a

while and now I'll have it ride the flow of the veins to the heart and penetrate the heart's walls.

– I told you you were in trouble – said Polnareff. – We'll smash you and it'll be "The End".

– Try it.

– What?!

– Satanic Coupler is ready to let its boiler explode, if the psychic contact between me and it gets interrupted. It's microscopic, but it will be able to open a hole in Abdul's stomach anyway.

– You're determined... – commented Abdul.

– Now, what will you do? – Absalom turned his gaze at Polnareff and the others as if taunting them. – I own the lethal switch, I'll kill you with my hands and will even be watching Satanic Coupler while it executes it. Because, after having penetrated Abdul's body, I will make it enter into every one of you.

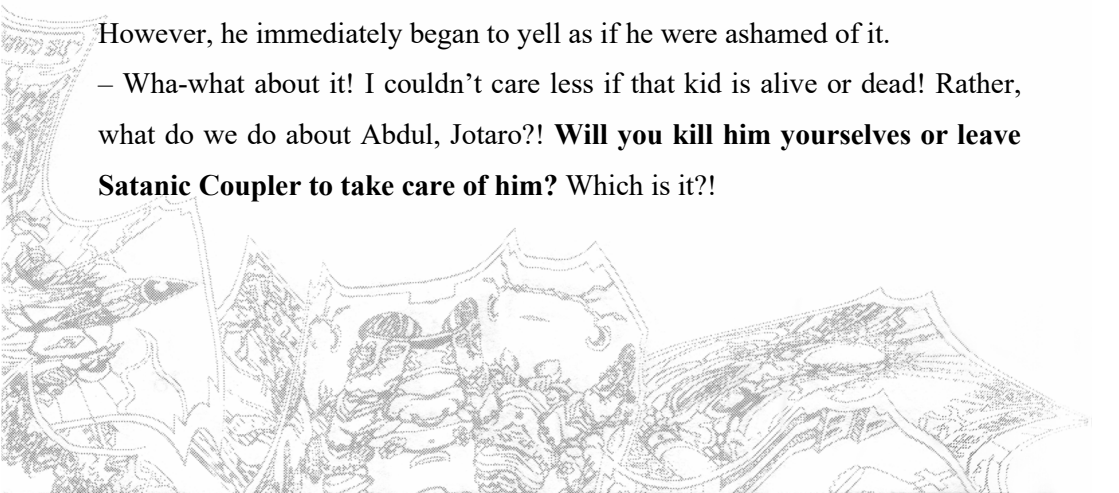
– Beh! – Polnareff spat on the ground, indignant, and added: – You're rotten to the core.

– Absalom. It seems the child you hit will be saved – abruptly muttered Jotaro, who had up until then been silently staring at Absalom with an intense look.

– Huh? – Absalom, after hearing Jotaro's words, remained stock-still in astonishment, but then whispered in relief. – Is that so…

However, he immediately began to yell as if he were ashamed of it.

– Wha-what about it! I couldn't care less if that kid is alive or dead! Rather, what do we do about Abdul, Jotaro?! **Will you kill him yourselves or leave Satanic Coupler to take care of him?** Which is it?!



– We choose neither. **You'll be the one dying**.

– What nonsense are you saying? Give me a good reason to be able to believe it...

– You're not the only one to have the power to shrink – replied a relaxed Kakyoin, interrupting Absalom's speech. – The Stand is the vital energy's manifestation. If you really have courage you shouldn't shrink yourself.

– No... no way... – Absalom blushed out of shame. – Don't tell me even your Stand is in Abdul's body!

– Yes, I followed you immediately. You didn't quite realise who you're dealing with.

– But you still haven't located Satanic Coupler's position! Well, if you can't pinpoint it in that labyrinth, your Stand is worth less than nothing. What if I rip through Abdul's heart right now?

– My Stand – said Kakyoin – can't see, but has a very developed sense of hearing, I would say a hundred times greater than a common human being. I clearly detect the sound of Satanic Coupler running, but since I can't see it, I decided to entrust everything to Star Platinum.

Kakyoin said the truth. It had an unbelievable sense of hearing and, miniaturised, Hierophant Green, could pick up the exact position of Satanic Coupler. It was preceding Star Platinum and ready to attack in the cardiac circulatory system.

The train slowly arrived with a steam boiler sound.

It had become an old and miserable steam locomotive...

That decayed train was the representation of Absalom's vital energy.

Star Platinum pointed the index and middle finger of the right hand towards Satanic Coupler.

– Star Finger...

Then they stretched directly towards the steam boiler, piercing it.

Absalom was pushed backwards, rolling legs up in the air in the desert. He puked blood, and fumbling around, plummeted with a crash on the sand without any strength.

Jotaro and Polnareff got closer to him cautiously.

– Six months or so for a full recovery – said Jotaro staring down Absalom.

– Why... why don't you give me the coup de grâce? – Absalom stuttered with a vacuous gaze.

Jotaro, with a slightly softened tone, answered: – I decided to give you the possibility to redeem yourself.

– Redeem myself?

– I don't care if you don't understand, but I just want to tell you this. In two weeks the Dio you so much adore will disappear from the face of the earth, and with him even the new world you wanted to go live in peacefully. At that point, where will you and your little sister go? ...If you'll reconcile with your friends, maybe they will understand you.

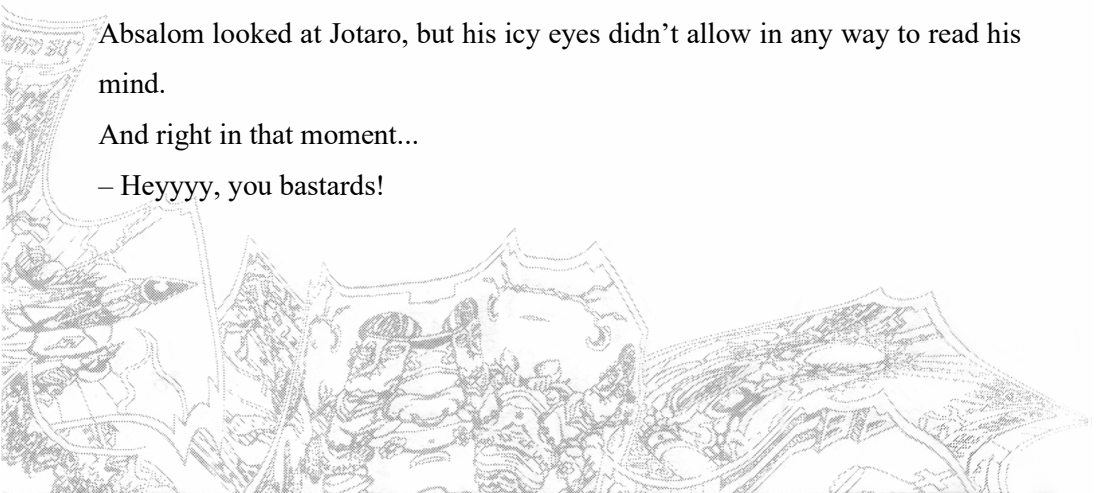
– M-me and m-my sister...?

– Don't worry – said Polnareff. – I don't have any intention of killing the girl. I just hit her with the back of the sword, Japanese style, and she fainted from the pain.

Absalom looked at Jotaro, but his icy eyes didn't allow in any way to read his mind.

And right in that moment...

– Heyyyy, you bastards!



A myriad of men was rushing towards them, aggressively wielding pieces of wood and canes.

It was the inhabitants of the village in the South, who had provided assistance to Jotaro and Polnareff.

– Hey! Absalom! But it's Absalom! And there's also Michal! But how did you get in such bad shape?! – shouted the old man observing a moribund Absalom and simultaneously staring at Jotaro and Polnareff, who were hesitant to talk.

– It's rather strange, now that I think about it. What the hell has happened?! You said you were Absalom's friends!

– N-no, it wasn't us... – Polnareff justified.

But the old man seemed to not want to listen to anything else.

– Aaah, now I understand. Then the mirages that were visible until a moment ago, even those were your doing. You're the subjects of Ababasubombo, the devil that they say lives in this desert!

– What are you blathering about? Who the hell is this Ababa-whatever?

– Hey, shut your trap! – the old man's blood rushed to his head from the agitation – I won't allow it! **Our** Absalom and Michal are important for us! You will be judged, you all!

Jotaro and the others fled like hell, followed closely by the villagers which brandished canes and pieces of wood, raising a big uproar. And running through the desert, they slowly got away.

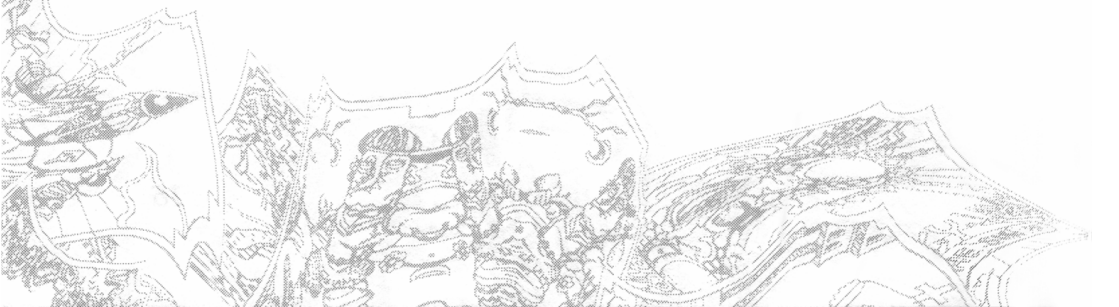
Absalom, left there, watched the empty air. His worn-out face didn't let any thoughts transpire.

A cheek, however, was streaked by a tear.

– ***Our***... – Absalom repeated in a whisper.

14

On the evening of the fifth day after the incident, Jotaro and the others were finally about to put their long and exhausting fight with the desert to an end.
At the top of a dune they saw that in order to reach an extended chain of rocky mountains they needed to travel more than ten kilometres. At the base of those mountains there was a city surrounded by a scrub of vegetation. Judging by its dimension it appeared that the city benefited from the advantages of progress.
Jotaro and his companions moved forward with a light gait.
– What might be Absalom's tragedy? – said Joestar talking to Abdul. – There's a thing that still doesn't persuade me. For example, his hatred... From whom, rather, from *what* might have been born?
– From the dark side of the civilised world... – replied Abdul after having thought about it. – The hostile nature of the desert... Absalom itself... Dio... I don't know...
– Won't it be too convenient to always put all the blame on Dio?
At Polnareff's words, Joestar and the others burst out laughing.
As one got gradually closer to the rocky mountains, the desert's shape gained undulations. Small and big dunes followed one another, and it could be clearly seen that now the sand was mixed with rocks.
Jotaro, touched lightly by a cool and damp breeze, turned around to realise how far he had travelled during those five days.
Then, something unexpected caught his eye.



Two dunes rose one after the other, appearing to overlap, and in the sky a star glowed with a dazzling light... It seemed he was looking at the illustration depicted in *The Little Prince*. Those two panoramas were like two drops of water.

Oi oi, could it really be it? thought Jotaro.

Should I really be finding ***that landscape for the second time*** *so easily?*

Is it possible that this landscape is simply scattered all over the desert?

I thought that the place I saw the other day really was the scenery of The Little Prince. *I believed it from the bottom of my heart.*

Then, how come?

I'm sure that in the book, it was written as if ***this landscape was unique in the world****. That's why, when I saw it yesterday, I thought I had made a great discovery.*

Tsk, I shouldn't have turned around.

If I hadn't turned around, I wouldn't have seen that landscape for the second time.

If I hadn't turned around, I would have kept believing that I had found the scenery of The Little Prince *in the desert. Even if that landscape can be found everywhere…*

Jotaro felt a slight disappointment.

He was angry at the harsh reality of it.

In the world, those who ignore reality are the happiest. ***If you don't want to spoil the desires you've grown in your hearts, you might as well ignore reality and be happy anyway.***

For the first time, he had the feeling of having understood the words of the old man, and simultaneously he was able to even understand Absalom's hell.

– Hey, Jotaro! What's gotten into you? Get moving!

From the foot of the hill Polnareff's voice was heard.

The faint flare of the sunset slowly began to dye the sky red.

The Gravestone of Red-Hot Sand

Egypt. The new city of Cairo, the result of a wave of modernisation that had there crashed: the sight it offered, if you excluded the lack of green, was not all that different from that of any European country.

Near a street corner, two men walked in the middle of the crowd.

– Then, what are you going to do? – one of them asked, with a dejected look.

He wore a worn student cap and a long uniform, almost like a coat. A gold chain clinked by his neck.

– Did we come here for tourism or not?

The man, whose eyes gave off an icy gleam like that of a Japanese blade, approached the old man who stood next to him. It was in a certain manner bizarre, the effect the school uniform had on him. The warrior side which prevailed over his appearance was light years removed from the world of a student. He'd dealt with countless fights, and gave off the feeling of a veteran of war.

That man's name was Jotaro Kujo.

– Polnareff will also be back soon, he left to search the city. Let's go back to the hotel, our base.

The slightly tilted hat allowed a glimpse at an impeccably white goatee. The "old man", judging from his constitution and his skin colour, must have been around his sixties. The short beard and the hair that was sticking out from under the hat seemed to clash with the rest of the body:

Joseph Joestar.

Jotaro's grandfather, a brave warrior who's lived through many battles and, in his younger days, saved the world from a being who declared himself to be the "ultimate".

– You're gonna let me act alone, aren't you? – Jotaro's unexpected remark left Joestar at a loss of words – We've got time until the sunset. In fact, if an enemy assassin were to come, it'd even be more convenient.

– Wait a moment, Jotaro. It could be extremely dangerous. We are in Cairo, the headquarters of the assassins. As far as we know, there could be a ton of Stand Users in hiding here!

– I get it, gramps.

His voice was dripping with nervousness and indignation.

– There's not that much time left. What do you plan on doing about your own safety?

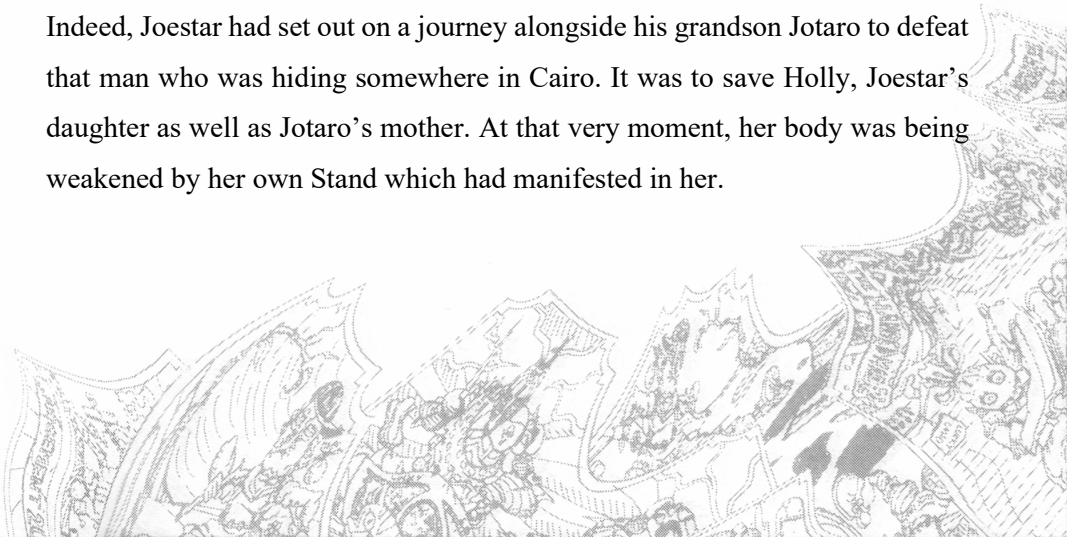
– Well… – he said, not listening. Then he turned on his heel and, completely ignoring Joestar's "We'll meet at the hotel before sunset, okay?", headed into the crowd.

Is there little time left? Joestar muttered to himself, watching Jotaro's retreating figure. Surely, the time limit was near. Until then, Dio, lurking somewhere in this city of Cairo, must be defeated.

Dio Brando.

An immortal man who, after surviving for a century at the bottom of the ocean, had stolen the body of Jonathan Joestar, Joseph Joestar's grandfather.

Indeed, Joestar had set out on a journey alongside his grandson Jotaro to defeat that man who was hiding somewhere in Cairo. It was to save Holly, Joestar's daughter as well as Jotaro's mother. At that very moment, her body was being weakened by her own Stand which had manifested in her.



For those who did not possess a “fighting spirit”, a Stand was a negative influence afflicting the body. That was why her Stand ability had made her so weak.
It probably all had to do with the fact that in her blood, that of the Joestars, flowed Dio’s negative influence.
Lying in bed, Holly fought against her own decline. The time limit Joestar mentioned was actually for saving Holly’s life.
Over forty days had gone by since they had set out on their quest, from Japan. They now had...
– Three days left – Muttering to himself, Joestar turned his gaze after Jotaro, who was now gone among the crowd.
The sun filtering through the cracks in the rundown houses was starting to head towards the West.

Drops of sweat, like stolen gems, streaked the cheeks of the man and fell to his chin. It was Polnareff who, slowly dragging himself at a snail’s pace, recalled the unpleasant feeling of sweltering heat.
I must find out who this enemy is. What kind of power does that bastard have? And how many Stand Users will be there? he wondered all at once.
He stood on a squalid alley, far from the heart of the city, around the north area of the al-Darb al-Ahmar neighbourhood. A small, cramped path flanked by stone walls. From behind them, he carefully watched out for anything in his surroundings.
I haven’t the faintest idea from where and under what circumstances will the enemy make its entrance. I could get away through the main street, but that won't work. My right arm is covered in bruises and the pain has raised my

heartbeat. Even if I ran like hell, I'd still be defenceless against any enemy that shows up.

– ...Enemy? – Polnareff whispered. Right, only an enemy would bare his teeth and clearly display an intention to kill. Still…

This is no joke. The Stand can only belong to one person. That is the rule. Regardless, no matter how many and who they are, they'll target me!

A seemingly monstrous demon. A giant with Tutankhamen's mask. An enormous Uraeus cobra.[6] A multitude of mummies. A stone colossus. Etcetera, etcetera…

There was no end to it.

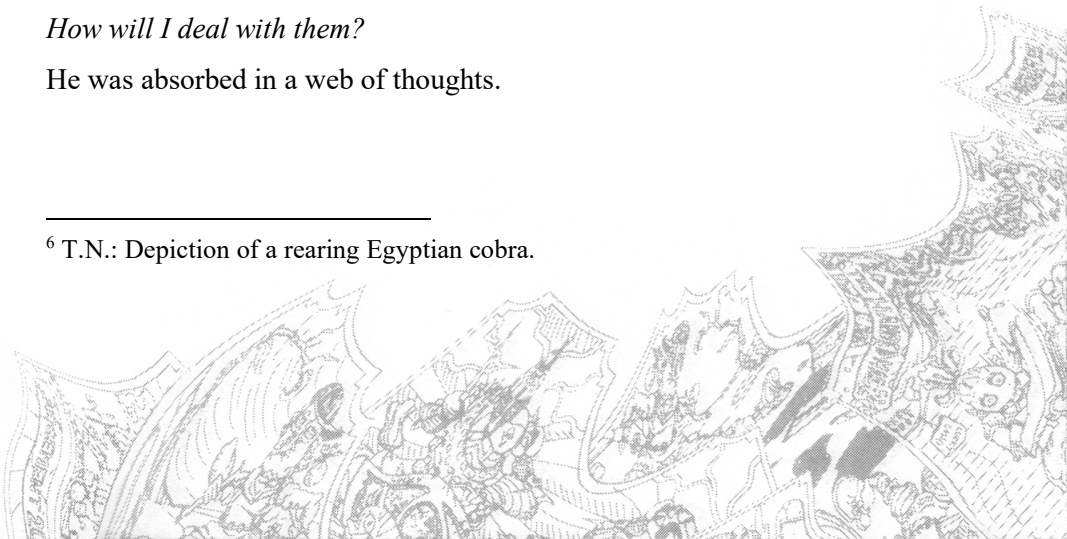
Polnareff had found himself fighting on his own against that wide variety of monsters. In the end, having been backed into a corner, he had evaded, and ran to this alley.

It was for sure a Stand, yet the monsters were of flesh and bone. Maybe it could be the product of an illusion created by a Stand.

While muttering to himself, he absentmindedly bumped the hand on his injured arm. It caused a stinging pain, like getting an electric shock.

These wounds prove it. It wasn't fake in any way. And what do I do now? How will I get it off my back? How many enemies are there? Where are they hiding? How will I deal with them?

He was absorbed in a web of thoughts.



[6] T.N.: Depiction of a rearing Egyptian cobra.

The afternoon sun boiled the sizzling body of Polnareff, hiding in the alley. The dry air ran over his wounds. Perhaps from the blood loss or a heatstroke, he was taken by a spell of intense vertigo. He was left without a choice: he had to call on whatever little fighting spirit he had left.

He was at his limit.

The Stand manifested at his back. His flesh and blood body was what housed Silver Chariot. His will of steel was what controlled the Stand. He could stand on his feet, but had started feeling himself taken by mental fatigue. Polnareff overlaid himself over Silver Chariot, just to contain at least some of his physical and mental weakening.

In that same instant, the sound of a horse's hooves was heard. Four horses, actually. The noise of hooves became louder and louder, underscored by the squeaking of steel wheels, like the springs of a worn mattress.

Is it a carriage? What, in a city like this?

It was the downtown area. The carriage ran through Cairo's streets, scoffing at the city's modernisation. But that echo that could be felt, was not that far away for someone. The sound of hooves was slowly approaching Polnareff.

– No… No way!

He couldn't even finish his sentence, shocked as he was. He could only stare at the strange **thing** destroying the brick walls, approaching him.

– …A… *chariot*…?

It was some sort of chariot of war, which also coincided with part of his Stand's name. A chariot with four armoured horses. An iron plated chariot, square and rough. In addition, atop it stood a soldier, as motionless as a statue. That was certainly a war chariot used in the times of the Roman Empire. Indeed, there was no doubt.

I must have gone mad! What the hell is something like this doing in the twentieth century and in a city like Cairo?!

– Silver Chariot!

An instant of confusion and then he unleashed his Stand.

Too late!

The crash of something falling apart was heard. The right arm was bent the wrong way, and the left leg was run through by an excruciating pain, like it had been struck by a hammer. Polnareff's deadly offense had been mitigated by the chariot's raging approach.

– Gahck!

He was launched into the air. The surrounding landscape, which blended seamlessly with the sunlight, flew away vertiginously from his sight. Only after, in a state of half-consciousness, did he realise he had been thrown to the ground by the chariot. The shape of the war horses' hooves, which had struck him repeatedly, was imprinted on his forehead. It was after that fall that he fell unconscious.

The chariot, after unleashing its destructive fury on the surroundings, came to a stop near Polnareff, who was lying helplessly on the ground. The two front horses, in full armour, neighed ravenously. Immediately afterwards, the chariot vanished into a mist without a sound. Perhaps that had been an illusion in broad daylight… But could Polnareff have really been defeated by some illusion?

By no means. A cloud of dust had left behind hoofprints of the war horses all over the place, as well as the gashes of the war chariot.

At that very moment, a voice rang out. The croaking voice of an old man. A tone so stentorian that it held the power of, in some way, imposing itself. Would a demon speak in such a way?

– The year 30 BC… – the voice began, – …in other words, the last year of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Under Octavius… Egypt becomes… a possession… of the Roman Empire.

The croaking voice kept speaking in the dust cloud.

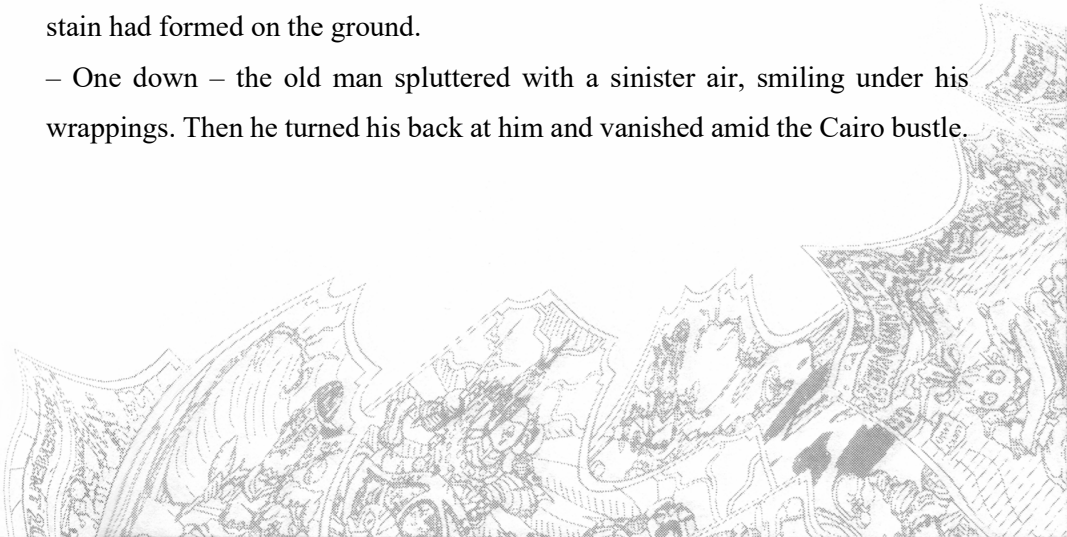
– In that period… in Egypt… appeared the shapes… of ancient Roman… war chariots. This is… a chapter… of the grand history… that I myself… have documented.

That being resembled a mummy. There was no way to tell its gender with certainty.

From the head hung some utterly dirty wraps. The face that could be glimpsed through the slits was covered in countless wrinkles and even the arms, which extended from between the bandages, looked like dried up branches. The bony and shrivelled hands clutched an ancient papyrus codex. Those brownish sheets almost looked like they were part of the hands. The old man tucked them between the wrappings with a rustle and approached Polnareff, who was still collapsed on the ground.

Jean Pierre Polnareff, User of a powerful Stand such as Silver Chariot, was lying there, motionless. He was wounded on his hands and sides. His blood, spread all around him, dried immediately under the sunlight. By now, a scarlet stain had formed on the ground.

– One down – the old man spluttered with a sinister air, smiling under his wrappings. Then he turned his back at him and vanished amid the Cairo bustle.



"The Genesis of Universe".[7]

Ladies and gentlemen, you surely must recognise it. It's the title of a mysterious book which narrates the past throughout eternity.

In ancient Egypt, where culture was significantly developed, many books were created with "papyrus", the origin of the "paper" we now use. Their contents covered a wide variety of subjects, ranging from history books compiled by scholars to personal diaries.

When *The Genesis of Universe* was brought into light, from the ruins of ancient Egypt, it was thought at first that its writings did not exceed the single volume. In 1908, British explorer E. Stevenson partook in a research expedition in the Valley of the Kings, also known for Tutankhamen. The expedition, of course, caused a great fuss, but at first he only scoured the surroundings of the Valley of the Kings and no satisfactory finds came up. Only afterwards, while digging underground in a presumed place of ceremonies, were unearthed some documents written in hieratic.

However…

Right when the writings were quickly deciphered and the name of *The Genesis of Universe* assigned to them, Stevenson vanished from the face of the Earth. What was behind his mysterious disappearance?

There are clues. Here is an overview by Stevenson of The Genesis of Universe, obtained from a reputable source.

«I cannot begin to explain how dreadful the contents of this book are. You only need to know it causes chills. Ptah is the Egyptian god of creation. This book

[7] T.N.: While 創世の書 can be read as "Book of Genesis" and there's no furigana telling us otherwise, we opted to always follow the name given in the character profiles to avoid confusion.

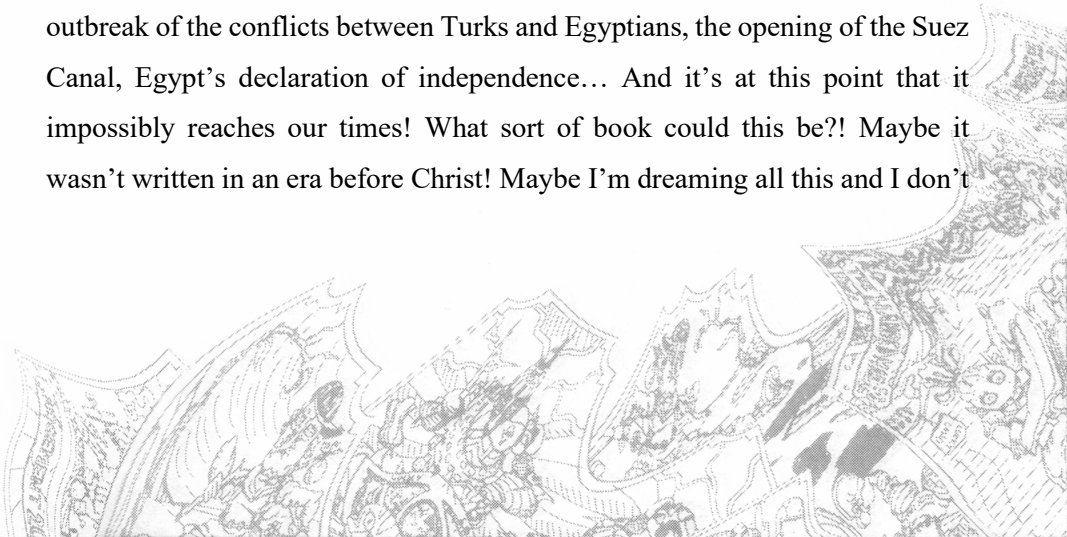
narrates the revelations of god Ptah and of Ani, the scribe who wrote them down. It's somewhat terrifying, the history of an Egypt of thousands of years ago is told to you…»

The summary of the book carried on.

«Historical documents which have "genesis" as their theme exist by the hundreds. The first chapter begins at the time of the first dynasty, around 3000 BC, then it continues through the many pharaohs, until it arrives at Egypt's takeover by Octavius, and around AD 30. So far, so good. Then the problems start cropping up. The fall of the Roman Empire, the invasion by the Crusades, the prosperity of the Ottoman Empire. The history follows up to AD 1500, but how come that in a book written during the era before Christ, the Middle Ages also show up recorded?»

At this point the writing begins to become tangled up. Here we discover Stevenson's state of confusion, although we will still try to reproduce his words.

«…Still I wish to continue anyway, because the real issue begins here. The outbreak of the conflicts between Turks and Egyptians, the opening of the Suez Canal, Egypt's declaration of independence… And it's at this point that it impossibly reaches our times! What sort of book could this be?! Maybe it wasn't written in an era before Christ! Maybe I'm dreaming all this and I don't



know it?! And yet this book is real! Did someone add appendices?! However, however…»

It ends here. Stevenson's summary is interrupted at this point. How come? The reason is a simple one. While writing it he was struck by a heart attack and died (there are also those who sustain that he was killed by a stroke). It was the first of January, 1913.

Furthermore, that crucial book, The Genesis of Universe, disappeared with him, to who knows where.

At the same time, Stevenson's report was written off as a fit of madness or of pure and simple mental disorientation. After all, the book which could certify what he'd written had suddenly vanished.

What is the truth?

By now we have gotten an answer.

Jean Pierre Polnareff was the proof.

"The Genesis of Universe".

Joestar and Jotaro were still unaware of the existence of such arcane prophetic writings.

– By becoming a scribe I would have hoped my name would be remembered for a long time. Not graved on a tombstone, but engraved in a book. The human being rots and returns to the ground as ashes. A book like this, instead, can reside in human memory for eternity… – Joestar read in a low tone while observing a souvenir papyrus seller in the middle of the street.

– Oh, these are famous phrases from ancient Egypt.

– Ah, indeed. This was written by a young aspiring scribe. Unknown author, that's about right.

– Well, you seem to know a lot about Egypt.

– My family, the Joestars, comes from England. The influence of that blood has always made me intrigued by ancient history. Ever since I retired, I've been spending my time browsing through the books of explorers.

– Heh, indeed. England boasts a tradition of great explorers and I can safely say that that English blood still flows even in yourself, Mr Joestar.

Joestar was heading towards the newer part of Cairo. Beside him treaded a giant with a dark face. Hair short and braided, the neck adorned by a peculiar necklace.

Mohammed Abdul. Stand warrior, who travelled alongside the three companions, Jotaro, Joestar, and Polnareff.

– So – Joestar uttered in a severe tone. – Soon it'll be dark. Dio is a vampire, he fears daylight and thus can only act in the darkness. Let's go, let's return to the hotel. It'll be best to join Jotaro and Polnareff, who went searching.

– Indeed. It's best not to poorly disperse our strength. From tomorrow on, we should stop splitting up like this.

– Hmm. In any case…

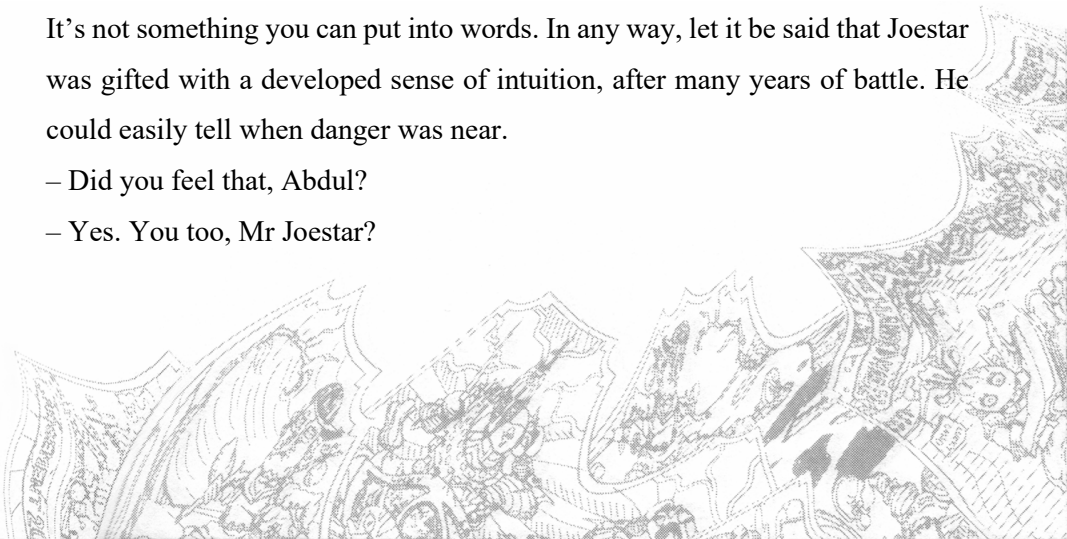
"In any case, until we pinpoint where Dio's lair might be, there's nothing we can do", that's what Joestar was about to say.

The air flow changed.

It's not something you can put into words. In any way, let it be said that Joestar was gifted with a developed sense of intuition, after many years of battle. He could easily tell when danger was near.

– Did you feel that, Abdul?

– Yes. You too, Mr Joestar?



– Surely they don't intend to start a fight in the middle of the city.

– It doesn't look good, we could get the passers-by involved.

They scanned their surroundings. The sun was becoming tinted in blood red. On the streets, silhouettes of hundreds of people hurried on their ways home. In that throng, a foreigner with the air of a tourist would stand out. The roads were overflowing with cars.

– We can't deal with an attack here. Abdul, let's go into that alley.

– I'm sure the enemy won't lose track of us.

– Exactly! – Joestar quickly sprinted into the small street to the right. Finally the two found themselves side by side in that alley.

It would be a difficult battleground for anyone, even for their opponents. Joestar had been right. In those kinds of circumstances they had a fifty percent chance against the enemy.

– Now…

At the end of the alley was a nauseating smell of rubbish. A repugnant smell. The street was very roughly asphalted. There was even an abandoned bicycle wreck.

– Where will the enemy come from?

After making sure there wasn't a soul in the area, Joestar gave a slight smile. Abdul also assumed the same cocky expression.

– Hermit Purple!

– Magician's Red!

The fury of the duo materialised in the air. Joestar's fighting spirit manifested through the thorny vines of Hermit Purple, while Abdul's spirit was incarnated in the flaming raptor of Magician's Red. And so they unleashed their Stands, getting ready for an eventual attack.

Turning back to back, they remained alert. Prudent and impeccable and, not foreseeing a surprise attack from the sides, one hugged the wall of the tall buildings on the right and the other, the left.

However the enemy's move was beyond what they could have imagined.

– Huh?!

– What?!

They examined each other with a suspicious look. Joestar rubbed his eyes, Abdul remained staring.

– H-how absurd, Mr Joestar! Where in the hell did we walk into?! Really, what kind of place is this?!

– Well, I also don't get what happened!

– But this…

A large stone temple. Above it, a platform on which stood forty-two elders dressed archaically. Before the eyes of both, a huge weight scale. On one dish, a bird's feather, on the other, a still-beating heart.

– We're at gates to the underworld.

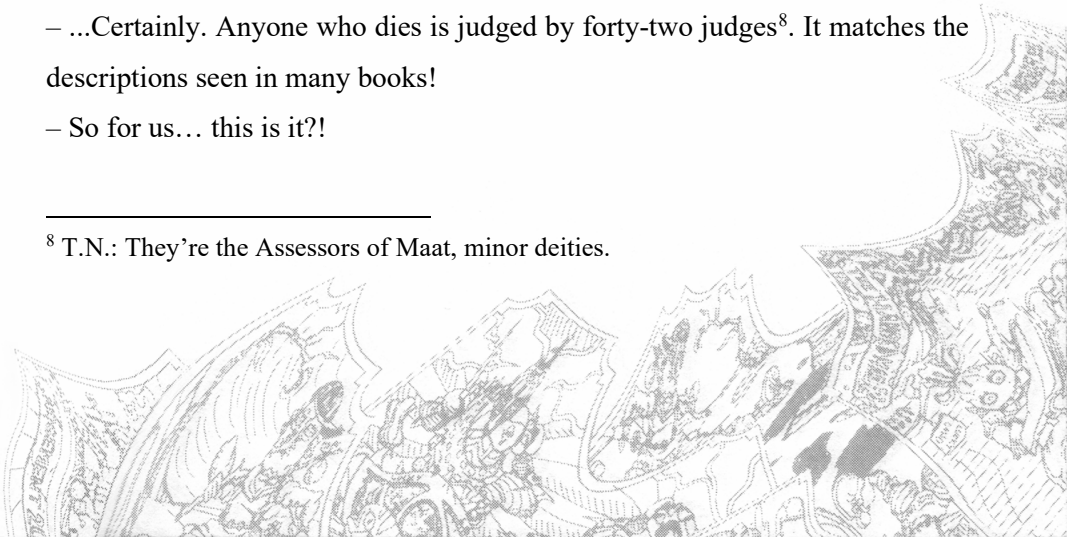
– What are you saying, Mr Joestar?!

– This is the scene of judgement at the gates to the underworld, dreamed of by the ancient Egyptians.

– ...Certainly. Anyone who dies is judged by forty-two judges[8]. It matches the descriptions seen in many books!

– So for us… this is it?!

[8] T.N.: They're the Assessors of Maat, minor deities.



– I don’t think so, I’m sure that this is a ploy by the enemy. Maybe they have a Stand which can manipulate illusions! – Abdul lost his patience and shouted, unleashing Magician’s Red’s power at his back. – We shall find out!

With a roar and a plenitude of sparks scattering everywhere, Magician’s Red burst into flames, painting Abdul’s features in red.

– Attack, Magician’s Red! Turn into flames and destroy this apparition for good!

The Stand, assuming the appearance of a scarlet comet, tore apart savagely every element in that scene.

– It’s an illusion! – Abdul shouted while Magician’s Red’s flames roasted the line of forty-two judges. It appeared like an infernal sight of bodies writhing in pain.

– Abdul!

– But how…?!

The old men, who had caught fire like they were paper, were human beings of flesh and blood. They wore on their faces expressions of pain and anguish. The smell of burning hair, the sizzling of roasting flesh, wails, screams, and furious voices.

– Stop it, Abdul! Dispel your Magician’s Red right now! That isn’t just an illusion! It’s real! They’re human beings, they’re of flesh and blood!

– That isn’t possible…

However, Joestar’s yelling did not reach Abdul.

– Mohammed Abdul!

Finally, Abdul replied by stopping Magician’s Red and its destructive fireball, but by then the forty-two old men were charred embers. Even the weight scale they had in front had been turned into a pile of ashes.

– My Hermit Purple…

The vines growing out of Joestar's arms had buried themselves into the pavement. And it had been through this exact method that Joestar had inferred that that was no illusion.

I can say only this: this isn't fake, but it's also not something real. Damn it! Besides this, my Hermit Purple can't see anything! And yet, it usually can tell apart real from fake. That was also the case in Hong Kong, it even managed to expose a perfect imitation of a Rolex. Even if it's one of Hermit Purple's specialties, this time I cannot tell for sure if it's an illusion or not.

– Calm down! I've told you to calm down!

In any case, Joestar focused on pacifying Abdul, who was clearly very distraught.

– Mr Joestar! I… I've done something unforgivable! I burned them one by one! It was my own Magician's Red!

– Relax. It was a vision, come on, it couldn't be anything else! – Joestar was lying, but he did so only to reassure Abdul.

– Not at all, I acted on impulse. My Stand really carbonised them. Mr Joestar, even you must be aware of this!

A thud. Something collapsed. It was the heap of bones of one of the old men who had been set on fire. It was like the sound of crumbling firewood.

– Mr Joestar, I…

– Calm down, Abdul!

The airflow changed again.

Both suddenly found themselves in the setting of earlier, at the end of an alley. The nauseating smell of garbage. The roughly asphalted street. The abandoned bicycle wreck.

– But, we're in the same place as before?

– Was it an illusion?

It was not. Even after returning to the exact same spot as before, the stench of cremated bodies was still mixed in with the stink of the garbage.

– It isn't an illusion. Otherwise, it wouldn't be so real.

– …An enemy Stand?

Both, confused, perceived a faint voice. A voice so feeble that it got lost in the bustle of the main street.

– In a distant past… in the era before Christ…

The voice seemed to come from their immediate surroundings. Joestar and Abdul were somewhat perplexed.

– The people… believed… in the existence… of forty-two judges… whose presiding judge… was god Osiris. I'm referring… to the legend… which narrates… the entry into the underworld.

A figure was beginning to be seen at the end of the alley.

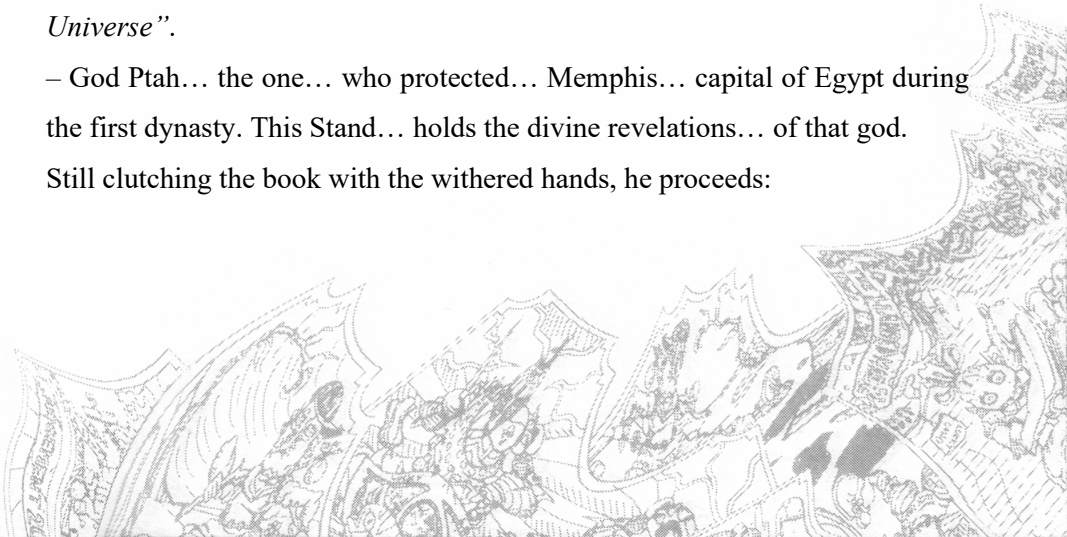
– This… is just a preamble… of the grand history… that I myself… have compiled.

It was the same mummy-like ancient who had defeated Polnareff shortly earlier. A papyrus was clutched in the withered hands.

The manuscript the old man held in his hands was the mysterious book discovered by the English research expedition. In short, it was *"The Genesis of Universe"*.

– God Ptah… the one… who protected… Memphis… capital of Egypt during the first dynasty. This Stand… holds the divine revelations… of that god.

Still clutching the book with the withered hands, he proceeds:



– This… is the so-called… "The Genesis of Universe"… in which… history… is wisely… kept.

– The Genesis of Universe?! – shouted Joestar.

That name sounded familiar to him.

When he had retired, he had finally allowed himself time for some hobbies, among which was history. But amidst all the reading, only one name had gotten to him: that of the explorer Stevenson, even if he'd always thought it had been a fake occult report.

– No way! So it really exists! And if that weren't enough, it's also *a Stand*!

Joestar remained staring agape at the old man. Abdul, instead, had yet to recover from the shock experienced a moment ago.

– I must have read about it somewhere… The Stand of "The Genesis of Universe" is very likely the posthumous image of the Stand of a man who lived in ancient Egypt. In some respects it is the same as god Anubis, which we ran into in Aswan.

God Anubis. A sword made five centuries ago by a swordsmith turned into a Stand and, even after the death of the actual swordsmith, it lived on as a Stand. The more people the sword cut down, the stronger its Stand got.

– I don't know what kind of tricks you've used on the British explorer who found the book, but you stole it from him. Since then, you have been taken over by "The Genesis of Universe" to this day. That's my guess.

Joestar stared at the old man with a challenging look, as if he already tasted victory. The old man, motionless, started leafing through the pages of the book.

– What's the matter? Don't tell me this stand "The Genesis of Universe", with god Ptah's revelations, is afraid? All because I cleverly saw through it and figured out its real identity?

– You are mistaken.

– In what way?

– Because in reality… that man is not dead.

– Don't say nonsense. The Genesis of Universe was discovered in the ruins of 1500 BC civilisation, he can't still be alive today.

As Joestar spoke, shivers ran down his back. The ancient was always motionless in front of him. Looking at him better, he really did look like a mummy.

I can't believe it.

He shook his head and added:

– ...he can't still be alive!

– The secret of Ba[9] reincarnation – whispered the old man.

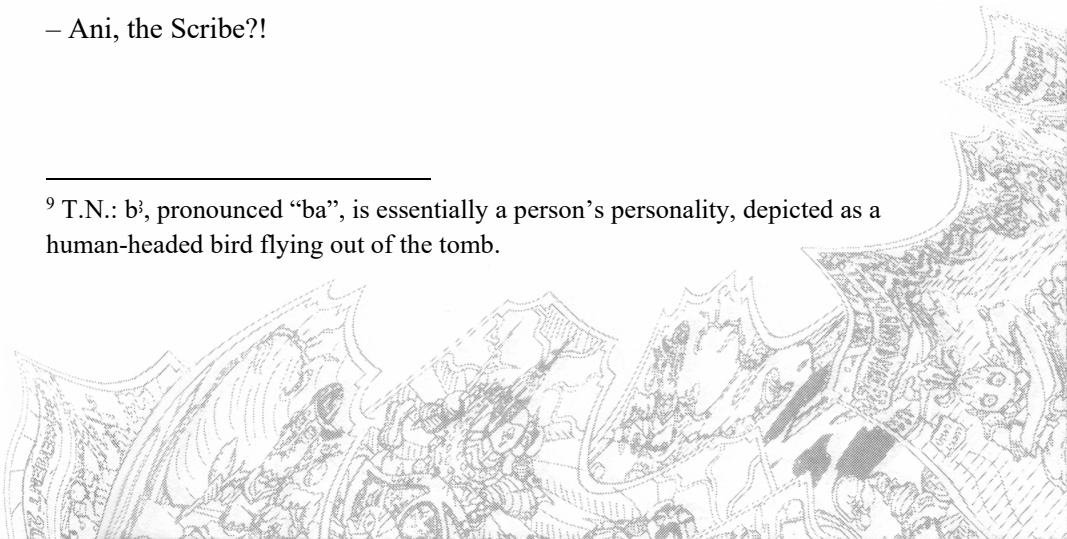
The ancient Egyptians believed that even if the body was destroyed, the Ba, or the spirit, was immortal and could be resurrected into this world. That's why they created magnificent tombs and turned the corpses into mummies so that the Ba could have a body to return to.

However!

– I won't believe that such a mystery exists in the world!

– Believe it or not. You're free to do as you please. In any case, my name is Ani. The Scribe… of your so-called… New Kingdom era.

– Ani, the Scribe?!



[9] T.N.: b3, pronounced "ba", is essentially a person's personality, depicted as a human-headed bird flying out of the tomb.

Joestar had come across that name multiple times in ancient Egypt's history. He was astonished, worse than Abdul.

In his heart, where enemy psychological warfare had never before reached, arose a feeling of numbness.

– In 1166 BC, during the Crusades, the Christian army from Jerusalem arrived at the Nile river mouth… right?

At that point, a considerable number of soldiers clad in a western style of solid armour appeared. They seemed to wish to surround Joestar and Abdul. On their large shields was seen a cross-shaped emblem.

They were the Crusaders, that army which up to then he had only seen in religious paintings… Well, now it was right in front of Joestar's eyes.

– The Crusaders?!

A soldier, brandishing his sword, charged at him before he could finish talking. Joestar barely dodged it, but still received a gash on his cheek. He began to bleed.

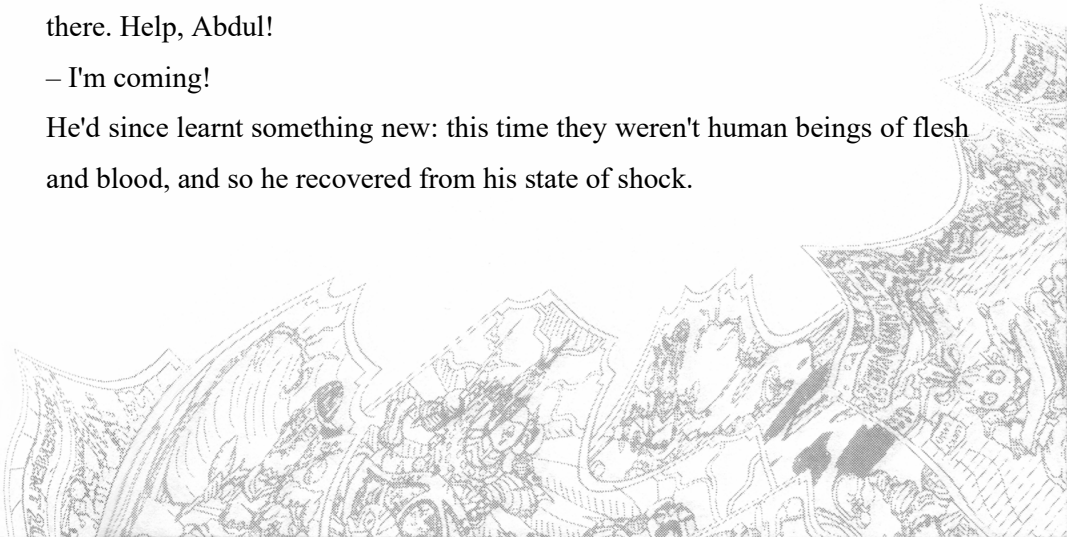
– So this is real! It's no illusion, it's definitely real!

There was no time to lose, the soldiers still brandished their swords, advancing right towards them.

– No, it is no illusion, and neither is it something real. But the wound is really there. Help, Abdul!

– I'm coming!

He'd since learnt something new: this time they weren't human beings of flesh and blood, and so he recovered from his state of shock.



Abdul called back his Magician's Red with cunning, aiming to threaten the soldiers without killing them.

– Come on, before it's too late!

Both bolted off. Magician's Red took the lead, and under Abdul's command it cut with his fire through the wall of soldiers that stood in their way. Abdul and Joestar followed right behind it.

– Legend… tells…

The old man's voice rang out behind their backs and the countless soldiers vanished in a cloud of dust.

– What is his plan? Where did the army go?!

– Let's not lose time, we take advantage of this and try to reunite with Jotaro and Polnareff. I still don't get this Stand!

– Agreed!

During their escape, the sky was obscured by something incredibly frightening.

– …of the Sphinx… half woman and half animal. It is said that… to stop travellers in their way… she would pose riddles to them. Those who could not solve them… would be devoured… so I've written… in a chapter… of the great… history of Egypt.

– This is a joke, right?!

Something blocked Joestar's way.

– I don't think so, Mr Joestar. Look! It's the legendary demon, the famous colossus, half woman and half beast that sits by the Great Pyramid! – said Abdul.

Obstructing the road was the demon with a feminine face and the body of a beast.

– Shit, but that… I don't understand anything anymore!

The length of that being was around the five metres. The body resembled that of a lion. She wore solid, bulky armour, roared ferociously, and sent spit flying everywhere.

There was no way out. To the right and to the left were the walls of buildings, ahead was the Sphinx, and behind was the old man inexorably threading towards them.

– Damn it, Mr Joestar, we're in trouble. We're between the hammer and the anvil. We don't know the extent of that old man's power, and then there's also the matter of getting away from the Sphinx's dangerous power!

– Let's not lose any more time!

Joestar acted quickly. Blazing like lightning, Hermit Purple released from his arms. The vines stretched and wrapped around an emergency ladder attached to some house's wall.

– Got it!

Joestar grabbed Abdul, and, like a wire being pulled by a winch, he shortened Hermit Purple's vines. They climbed up the wall like spiders.

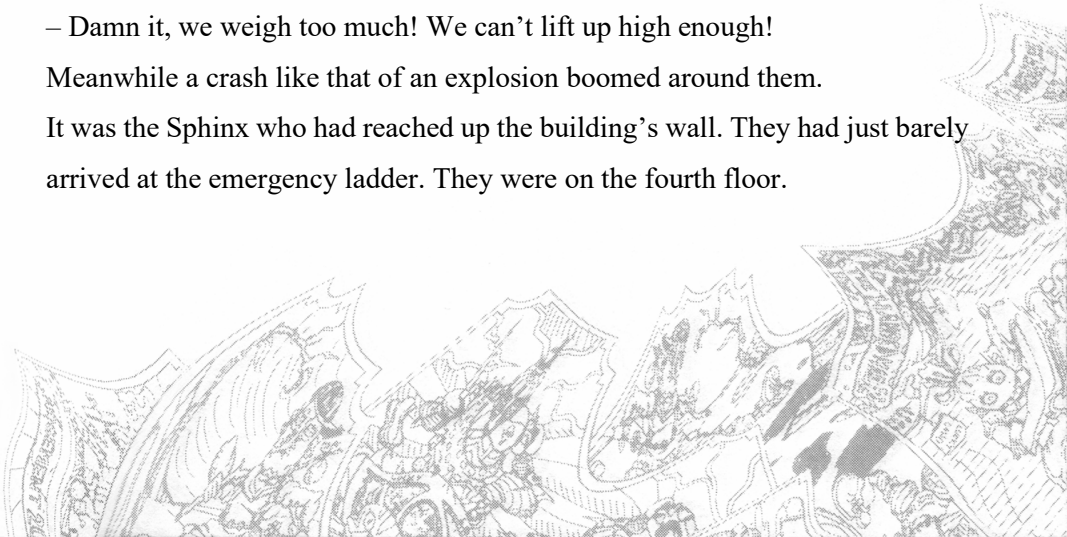
The Sphinx roared. She readied her body like a coiled spring about to burst into a tall leap.

– Mr Joestar, come on!

– Damn it, we weigh too much! We can't lift up high enough!

Meanwhile a crash like that of an explosion boomed around them.

It was the Sphinx who had reached up the building's wall. They had just barely arrived at the emergency ladder. They were on the fourth floor.



The Sphinx, upset, clawed at the walls, but even if she had jumped, she'd fall short of them.

– Let's get out of here!

The knob of the emergency exit didn't turn. It seemed to be locked from the inside.

– Oh, shit!

They slammed against the door violently. Even if it was thick and made of steel, with the strength of both of them it almost came unhinged.

– Good grief… the enemy seems to have given up.

Truth be told, the Sphinx's roaring had faded away.

– No!

– What is it?!

Abdul, turning around, had changed into an expression of chagrin. At the end of the corridor, shrouded in darkness and dust, was an ancient Egyptian boat. It had two bows and no stern, and inexorably headed towards them.

– These jokes have stopped being funny!

The ship kept advancing, ploughing through the sea inside that corridor.

– How is it possible for a ship to be in here?!

After saying this, Joestar found himself standing before countless soldiers who, standing on the ship, all wielded their weapons at the same time. A moment later they were swept under by a shower of blades.

– I'm looking for someone, he wears a hat. An old man, good for his age, dressed as an explorer. He's around a metre ninety tall. Have you seen him, by chance? – asked Jotaro.

But the street seller kept prattling on, with a small bottle in his hands.

Jotaro Da!

– Yes, I've seen him somewhere, but I don't remember where. This perfume is made with Lotus flower essence. It's a curious treasure from ancient Egypt. It's not expensive, and it's perfect for a gift. You'll see, your girlfriend will be amazed. It's a natural perfume: anyone wants one.

– Tsk!

Jotaro remained impassive and calm, without letting his troubled state show.

Night fell.

He'd given up his search for Dio and returned to the hotel, but there were no traces of Polnareff, Joestar, and Abdul.

Did Dio send an assassin?

He had a bad feeling about it and started searching all over Cairo without a proper destination. Finding no signs of them, he started worrying. So he turned back again to the street vendor. He spent all day on the street trying to sell to the tourists, he surely must've known something.

– It's cheap, if you help me out and buy this perfume, maybe I'll be able to remember something.

– Yare yare daze...

You can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs. Jotaro handed him 10 Egyptian pounds.

The street vendor smiled and, holding out the perfume bottle, pointed at the alley next to the old building.

– Two travellers, or at least they looked like so, went into that alley roughly a bit over half an hour ago, searching for something.

As soon as he heard those words, he dashed towards that alley. Indeed, Joestar and Abdul had plunged into that chasm between the buildings.

The fight wasn't over yet.

Joestar and Abdul barely avoided the deadly attack from the ancient ship and then took off. However the situation was still quite dire. Rubble kept falling off everywhere.

Again came that sinister voice.

– It was the 1300 BC… give or take a year… in other words… under Ramses's ruling…

It was the old man's voice. The rubble kept accumulating on the ground with no end in sight, but the dust ascended to the sky alongside that voice.

– ...In the region of Luxor… the temple of Amun… was started… a large temple… accompanied by a colossal statue. The statue of Pinedjem… a high priest.

Then the rubble created a vortex, which was beginning to take the appearance of a giant.

– So… I've written… in a chapter… of the great history…

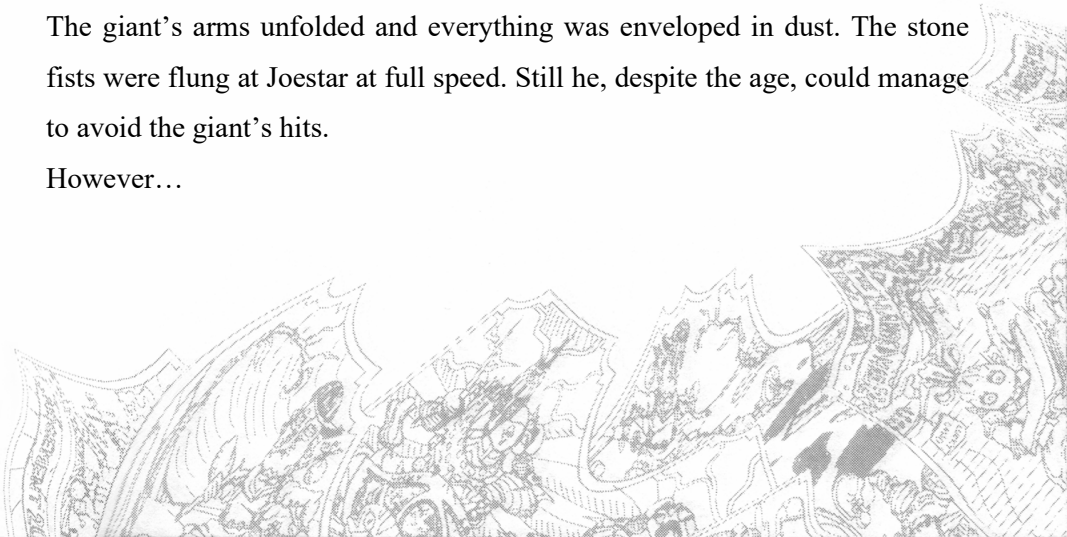
The moment he stopped reading, the rubble and the dust had assumed a proper shape.

A giant head with a leather hood. The body slender, arms folded: it was a stone giant of seven metres.

– It's the statue of Pinedjem of Luxor, a relic from the kingdom of Ramses II.

The giant's arms unfolded and everything was enveloped in dust. The stone fists were flung at Joestar at full speed. Still he, despite the age, could manage to avoid the giant's hits.

However…



While he was backing off, his legs bumped against something and he lost his balance. He tripped over the debris, and in that instant he saw his life flash before his eyes.

The giant's fists kept chasing him.

– Mr Joestar! – Abdul screamed desperate.

But he didn't make it in time. His Magician's Red was not in range. Joestar reached his hands out but it was useless. He had no way out of that situation.

– Polnareff!

A man as quick as lightning showed up out of the blue, shoving Joestar. That whirlwind was Jean Pierre Polnareff alongside his Silver Chariot.

Joestar and Abdul tumbled to the ground, getting tangled up.

The giant's fists met the floor, leaving behind a crater in the ground.

– Right on time, Mr Joestar.

– Where the hell have you been? And that wound?!

– What…?

Polnareff suddenly stood up, shaking the dust off himself.

– ...I've had a couple run-ins with this mummy a bit earlier, and I got stupidly wounded by distraction.

Then, with eyes sharper than his Silver Chariot's own blade, he turned to the old man, standing in a corner, and added:

– You thought you were done with me… Well, I'm sorry for you, but I've got some thick skin!

The chariot controlled by the old man hadn't had the desired effect on Polnareff. His indomitable fighting spirit had allowed him to make a furtive comeback.

– Polnareff, watch out! The giant is about to attack again! – Abdul said, rushing in haste.

The three Stand warriors were again united: Joseph Joestar, Mohammed Abdul, and Jean Pierre Polnareff.

– That old man's Stand seems confusing. I won't say that the attack is necessarily the same as the one Polnareff suffered.

– What is…

– …the true nature of his Stand?

– The papyrus he has on his hands! That is the Stand's source of power. Everything is related to what's written!

The old man stood still in surprise. Polnareff kept talking.

– Essentially, he can control countless Stands, but only by making them show up one at a time. Every single chapter contains one!

– Now I see. Indeed, Abdul and I have dealt with a handful of them.

– I've found out how it works.

– Indeed!

Silver Chariot, hovering behind Polnareff, drew its sword and pointed it at the old man.

– I, Jean Pierre Polnareff, have decided to return you the favour!

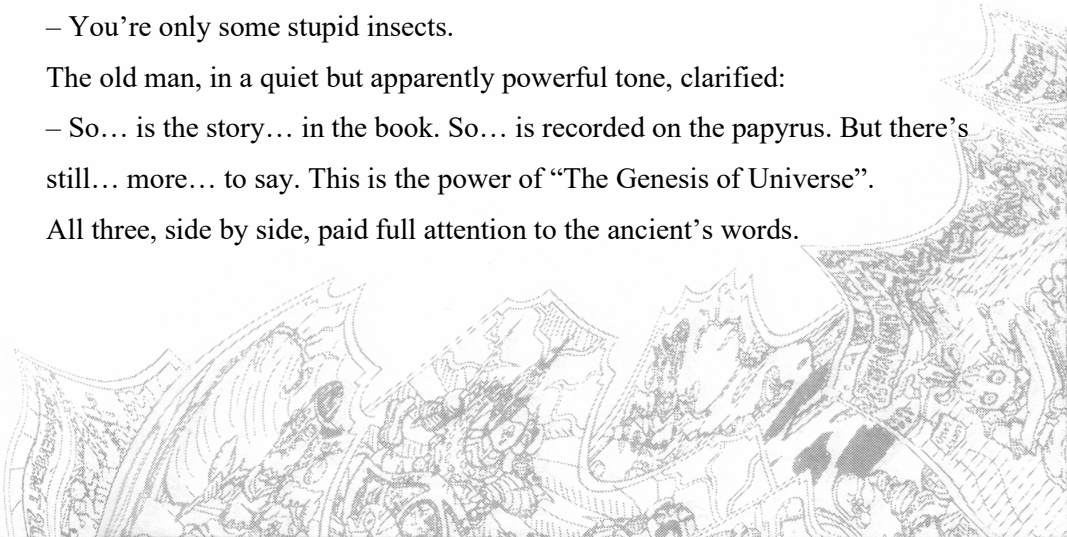
– Ku… kuku… ku... – The old man let out an eerie chuckle. A chuckle… that sounded more like the clattering of dry and withered bones being dropped.

– You're only some stupid insects.

The old man, in a quiet but apparently powerful tone, clarified:

– So… is the story… in the book. So… is recorded on the papyrus. But there's still… more… to say. This is the power of "The Genesis of Universe".

All three, side by side, paid full attention to the ancient's words.



At the same time, the stone giant returned to being motionless as a statue.

– I don't expect… at all… that you manage to understand… the history I'm reading. It's the grand history… of Egypt. You… are proudly… satisfied… to shine… for a few decades of life… a vermin's existence…

The old man raised the papyrus and once again breathed life into the gigantic stone statue. With the racket of a thousand pieces of armour rubbing against each other, the colossus took a step forward.

– Defeating this... "The Genesis of Universe" where... the history of Egypt... spanning from... the ancient times to the future... is kept... is...

The giant, with a leap, turned itself into a projectile headed straight at them, in order to destroy them.

– …impossible!

– I will turn you back into a relic! In fact, I'll kindly make you return to the cemetery you came from!

Joestar and Abdul tried in vain to hold back Polnareff, who had a burning rage lit in his eyes.

– A stone statue is nothing against Silver Chariot's sharp sword! – Polnareff shouted, pointing right at the colossus alongside his Stand.

He brandished the sword and its glow drew an arch. That trail of light split the statue in two in less than no time.

It seemed to be…

– What the hell…?!

…gone.

The statue hadn't been broken. The pile of dust and debris was the same as before. The sword hadn't been fast enough, the old man had managed to cancel The Genesis of Universe's Stand ability.

However, immediately after, Polnareff was swept under an avalanche of seven metres of rubble.

It was the statue.

The injuries he'd received in the previous fight only worsened, and with that rain of debris he also received new ones. Polnareff groaned and squirmed in pain.

– Polnareff! – called Abdul, rushing to help.

Polnareff began to drag himself out with the help of his arms.

– Here, come on!

Abdul tried to move him to safety, but at the moment in which he had bent to get him out of that tomb of debris, he saw his friend become still.

– What happened?! Abdul?!

Abdul had been skewered by an ancient Roman soldier's sword. He collapsed to the ground and blood began to gush out of his chest. Polnareff shouted once again.

– Abdul!

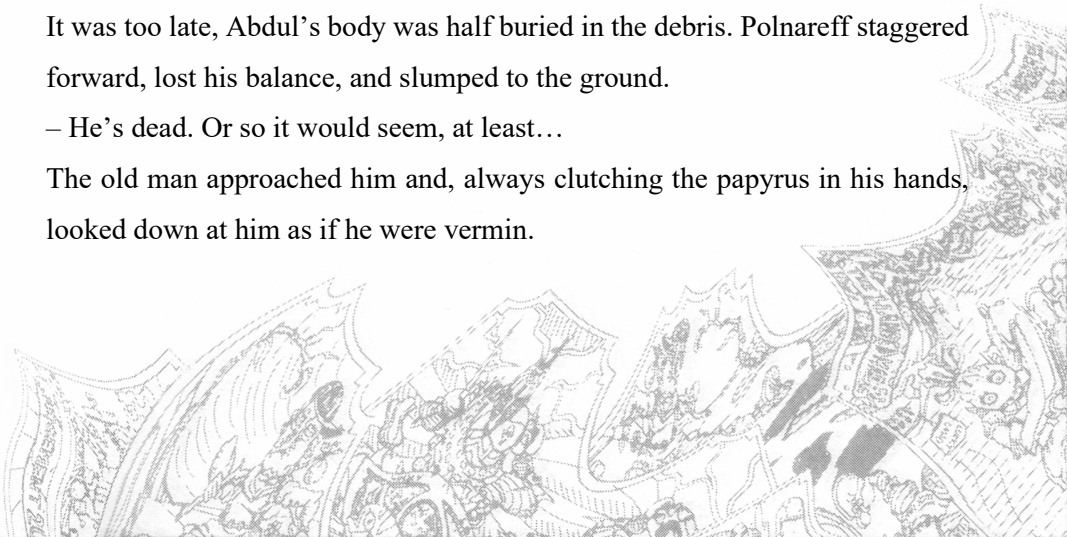
There was no answer. In fact, falling on him, Polnareff hurriedly rolled to the other side, crumpling by the feet of Joestar, who was standing stock-still.

– Abdul! Abdul! – he shouted with all he had.

It was too late, Abdul's body was half buried in the debris. Polnareff staggered forward, lost his balance, and slumped to the ground.

– He's dead. Or so it would seem, at least…

The old man approached him and, always clutching the papyrus in his hands, looked down at him as if he were vermin.



– In fact, you're severely injured. You're a fool. You… inexperienced human beings… with your Stands… cannot compete… against the gravity… of an Egyptian history… of four thousand years… – The old man still clutched the papyrus in his hands, when the Roman soldier responsible for Abdul's wound disappeared.

– And you two? Are you scared to death? What, won't you help out your friend? Well, if you don't hurry up, this man… will soon… bleed to death! – said the old man, laughing with a threatening and mocking tone. Then he stepped on Abdul's face with his bony feet.

– Ughhh…

Abdul whimpered, unconscious.

– Stupid… vermin…

Then he spat on him. His viscous brownish saliva soiled Abdul's forehead.

– Hey, you!

Polnareff couldn't take it anymore: despite his brutally injured body, he found the strength to ignore the pain and to charge against the old man, fuelled by fury and indignation.

However…

– Wait!

Joestar grabbed him from behind, attempting to quiet his rage.

– Let me go, Mr Joestar. Abdul has saved my life in Calcutta! That bastard, that piece of shit, he has to pay for it once and for all. Even if it costs my life. I'm telling you, let me go!

From his voice, it sounded like Polnareff was crying, but that was not the case.

– Let me… Let me tear that bastard to shreds!

– Polnareff! – yelled Joestar, grabbing him by the shoulders.

– Listen, do you think you're the only one who's angry? I also feel the same way! I'm seething!

– …

– Try to understand, Polnareff. If we keep like this, we won't solve anything. Abdul will make it, you'll see. His heart is still beating!

– But Mr Joestar!

– If we keep acting on impulse we'll end up just like that. We must focus on *The Genesis of Universe*. Its power depends on the book that the old man is holding in his hands. Calm down, relax. We don't have the means to fight back.

– Relax?

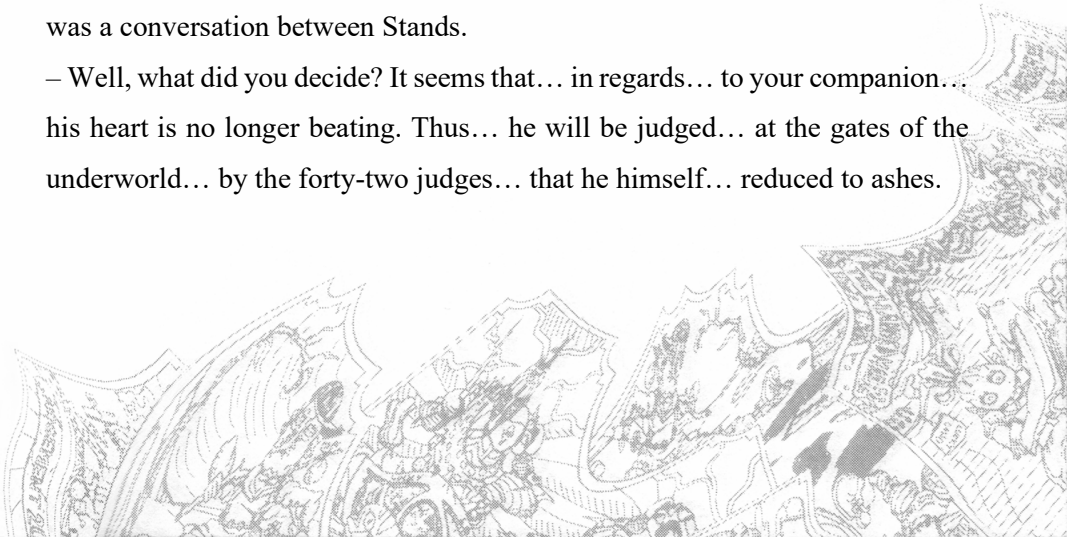
– Yes, because losing your cool on the battlefield can end up badly. We must come up with a good plan. We must find an opening and unleash an attack, aiming at his weak spot.

– ...Understood. Ok, I get it, Mr Joestar. If we don't make it, however, Abdul will be done for.

– Now let's come up with a sound plan!

Both started communicating through their Stands. It was a mental exchange of ideas, a telepathic conversation. Normally it would have taken them multiple minutes but the telepathic connection ended after just some seconds, since it was a conversation between Stands.

– Well, what did you decide? It seems that… in regards… to your companion… his heart is no longer beating. Thus… he will be judged… at the gates of the underworld… by the forty-two judges… that he himself… reduced to ashes.



Having said this, he stomped one more time with his bony foot on the collapsed body of Abdul. With each hit, Abdul's arms twitched and shook.

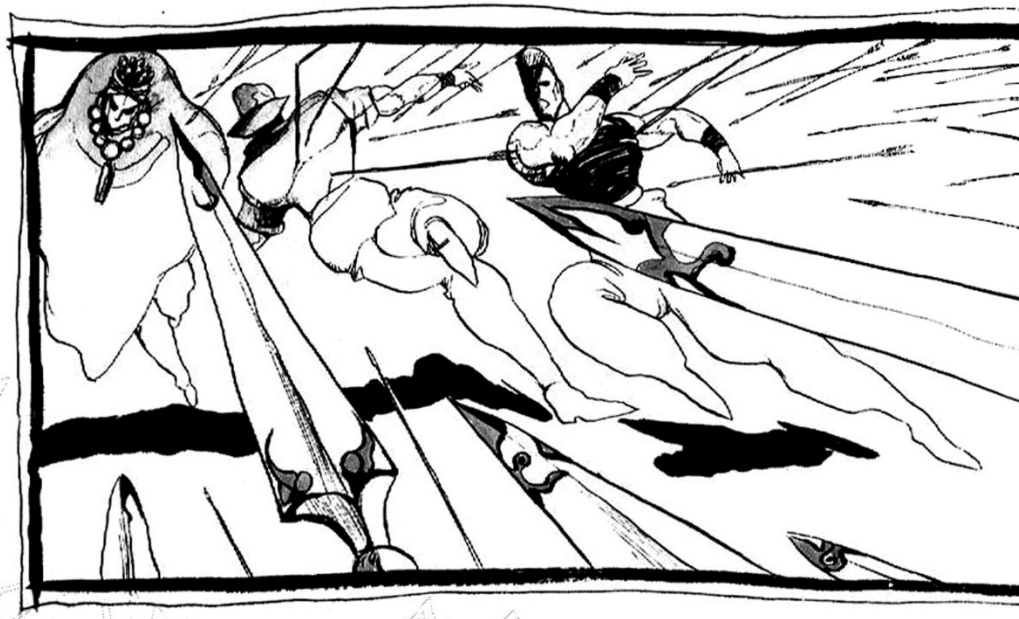
– Well... what shall we do? – the ancient said in a triumphal tone.

The only problem left to solve, for the old man, was the excessive attachment to life that Polnareff showed. But in the end it didn't matter to him anymore. All that was needed was to torture him. He'd sworn eternal devotion to Dio. He worshiped him, the ruler of the world, the immortal man who had chosen Egypt as his lair.

Joestar and Polnareff, yelling like madmen, threw themselves at the old man at the same time.

– Mr. Joestar!

– Now!



They split up. Any direction was game, provided they managed to deal him the deathblow to ensure their survival.

Risking your own life, that is the harsh rule of war.

Joestar and Polnareff approached with wild-eyed looks, and in an instant came up with an attack.

– You… human beings… can't make it… you've abandoned a friend… and have charged… without a proper plan… – said the old man, gripping the edge of a page of *The Genesis of Universe*.

– Hermit Purple!

The thorny vines of Joestar's Stand projected out of his arms.

– Silver Chariot!

Beside Polnareff appeared his Stand in its sturdy armour.

One from the right, the other from the left, they moved like bullets towards the old man, attacking from both sides. And then, simultaneously, both unleashed lightning-quick attacks.

– Take this!

– This is for Abdul!

Both Stands were released.

– You will all… be judged… at the gates… of the underworld…

Behind the old man's back appeared an army. It was the allied forces of Antonius who'd fought fearlessly against the romans.

– Huurgh! Just a bit more!

– At least a stab on it or something!

– The Genesis of Universe!

Joestar, at his limit, extended the vines of Hermit Purple as far as he could. In the meantime, Polnareff drew out Silver Chariot's sword.

It was late. They were too far to make it.

However Hermit Purple managed to brush *The Genesis of Universe* the old man clutched in his hands, and Silver Chariot left faint scratches on the cover.

Meanwhile the soldiers had pulled their bowstrings simultaneously, shooting out countless arrows. From the noise, though, it seemed like only one had been released. The shot had actually been instantaneous: the arrows released by the soldiers from the right wing aimed at Polnareff, those of the left were instead headed at Joestar. The old man was in the middle. A successive attack at close range, hard to avoid. The arrows increased dramatically.

– Shit!

Both tried to dodge the arrows, but there were too many of them. It was the end for them. They managed to avoid the first half, but then the arms, the stomach,

the legs, and the back were consecutively skewered by the rest of the deadly rain.

Swept back by the vehemence of the arrows, they went to bump into an unseen wall. A crack, and then Joestar and Polnareff collapsed on the ground. The noise that had been heard was probably from the fractures they had both received. They could no longer get up.

Staring at them satisfied, the old man closed the pages of *The Genesis of Universe*, and at the same time the soldiers aligned behind his back also disappeared.

– It has ended. The only ones left are... Jotaro Kujo... and his Stand. And then... that bug... Noriaki Kakyoin... that is still being treated. Soon... even they... will die... thanks to my The Genesis of Universe... This... is another chapter... of the great history... that I wrote.

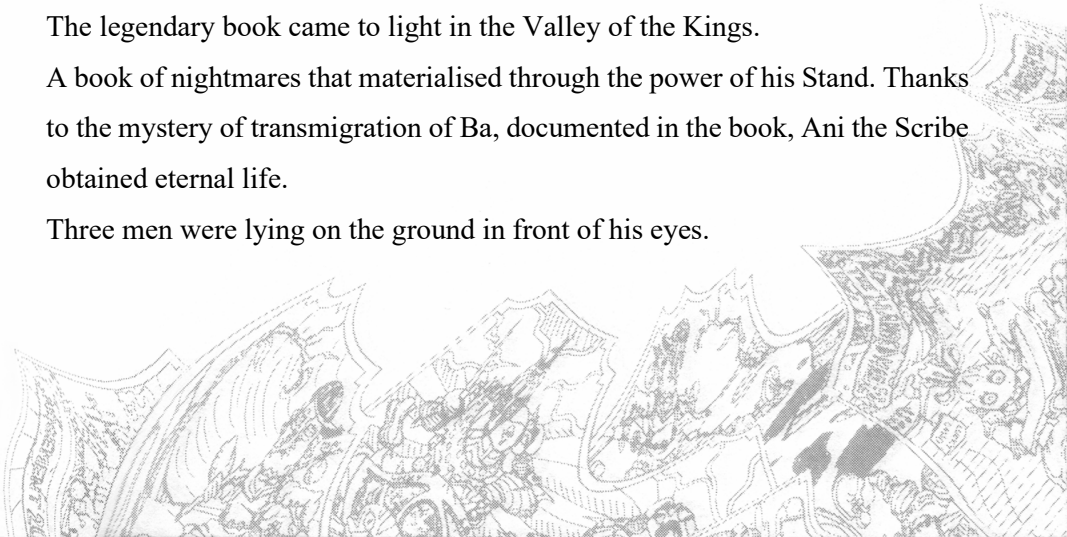
Weak laments could be heard in the air. It was the groans of Abdul, Joestar and Polnareff, helpless, agonised, and covered in blood. But the echo of the old man's laugh drowned that whining.

– There are no mistakes... in this history. Because... I... am... the history. The great... history... of Egypt – he said, raising *The Genesis of Universe*.

The legendary book came to light in the Valley of the Kings.

A book of nightmares that materialised through the power of his Stand. Thanks to the mystery of transmigration of Ba, documented in the book, Ani the Scribe obtained eternal life.

Three men were lying on the ground in front of his eyes.



– Good... the time has come... to send you... to the gates of the Underworld.

For Abdul, Joestar, and Polnareff, the last hour was approaching. The old man, better known as Ani the Scribe, would have eliminated them in an instant with his The Genesis of Universe.

At this point they were close to death.

The old man browsed again the pages of *The Genesis of Universe*. His face hinted a menacing laugh, but before killing them he would have to find the right page. Then it would have been sufficient to halt on the exact point and read it under his breath. Only this way he would have been able to summon, at his discretion, the events there described.

But in the moment in which he was about to read...

– You're quite disturbing indeed... It seems like you stepped out of a museum.

Behind his shoulders echoed a voice. A deep voice. An energetic voice, threatening and commanding at the same time.

The one who spoke had been...

– Jotaro!

Joestar, lying on the ground and on the verge of unconsciousness, found the strength to pronounce that name.

– Jo... ta... ro – repeated the old man.

Then again:

– Jotaro Kujo...

Who knows when he got closer. Jotaro Kujo was behind the old man, emanating a fearsome fighting spirit with clearly murderous intentions. The warrior who manipulated the stand Star Platinum, of exceptional power, ultra-precise movements, and unmatchable speed. The man in which flowed Joestar blood.

– Oh... you... Jotaro... Kujo. They say that... you are very afraid... of Lord Dio...

– It's dangerous, Jotaro! Watch out for that man's Stand! – Joestar yelled desperately.

But Jotaro silenced him with a look.

– Shut your trap, grandpa. I think I've basically understood who I'm dealing with.

– Suit yourself, Jotaro. But I warned you, it's risky to get closer to that man!

– Exactly – added the old man, looking at *The Genesis of Universe*. – Even though… you're so… close… I'm already… at a point… where I… can summon… the contents... written in the book… in the blink of an eye.

It was indeed true. To materialise the contents of *The Genesis of Universe* all he needed was to silently read the text of those pages. However, as it has become clear from the events up until now, the old man finished reading the contents of a page at the same time he selected it.

– Interesting.

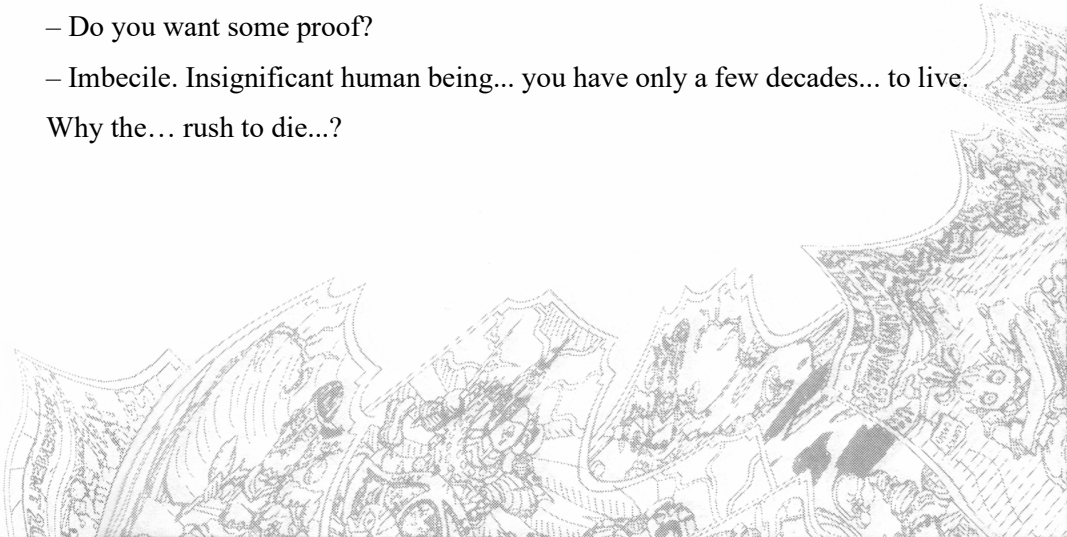
– In... teres... ting?

– You won't have the time to summon your local knick-knacks. From this distance my Star Platinum will break you in half like a watermelon in no time.

– Is that so... but even if... your attack... were to be supersonic... it would never... be able to take down... what I materialise...

– Do you want some proof?

– Imbecile. Insignificant human being... you have only a few decades... to live. Why the… rush to die...?



– Back off, Jotaro! – shouted Joestar, crawling on his arms because of his fractured legs. – His The Genesis of Universe it's not a Stand like the others! Run away before it's too late! Don't worry about us!

– Shut up! – Jotaro replied menacingly. The surrounding air vibrated. – Stay there and be quiet.

There's no stopping it now. Joestar concluded as much upon hearing Jotaro's voice. *Until now that's how it went. Having to hold back Jotaro Kujo, my grandson, who's trembling in silent anger.*

The old man, meanwhile, was sure he had already won. A successful plan. His next card would have been the beast-goddess Ammit, a very powerful demon who fed on the still-pulsating hearts of sinners that got judged at the gates of the underworld. The people whose hearts get devoured by Ammit, it is said that they are removed from this world. Not just in body, but in soul as well.

Ammit, or Ahemait. The largest and the most powerful demon among the Egyptian legends.

And now the old man had already finished the silent reading of the pages describing this demon. Ammit was secretly being summoned under the rubble below the old man's feet. Jotaro, on the other hand, still believed he hadn't finished reading those pages, not to mention that he wouldn't dream of thinking a demon would appear from under his feet.

This was a certain victory against Jotaro.

– What is it... you're not... coming yet? – he asked impatiently.

However, Jotaro...

Understood that the next attack would have been the final one. The old man had probably saved for him the fiercest pages and he would have launched an attack of unprecedented strength.

But what would have been the weapon?

Himself? *The Genesis of Universe* he gripped in his hands? Or something he hadn't shown yet?

What to do...?

The sun was setting. Cairo's evening. The surrounding landscape was painting itself red.

Jotaro and the old man glowered at each other, their shadows were stretching more and more.

A horse's neigh was heard. If one paid even more attention the hustle of the street could be heard. The cars' honks. The people's footsteps. The voices of the peddlers. Anything that made a sound.

After that...

It felt like there had been a long, drawn-out pause before Jotaro finally made his move. The victor would be the first to move. That saying gave him a sliver of hope.

– Oraaaaaaaaa!

A cry. And then Star Platinum, the long-haired warrior Stand, appeared behind Jotaro's back. Its lethal punches had the power of destroying anything on earth's surface.

A soldier full of hatred, rage, and resentment. Jotaro's blood boiled in his veins. He had to use all of his strength and focus it to defeat the one obstacle that stood in his way.

In the meantime the old man snickered.

– You're finish... ed.

Jotaro tripped and Star Platinum was affected by it.

– What?!

The ground beneath Jotaro's feet was rising.

It was Ammit, the beast-goddess that the old man had summoned previously. She emerged from the surface like a mountain.

– Jotaro!

Joseph's voice got lost in the clamour of Ammit's appearance.

– Are you ready... to be judged... Jotaro?! I'll let... your heart... be devoured... and I'll make you... disappear... once and for all.

The head resembled that of a crocodile, the upper body half was of a lion, the lower half resembled that of a hippopotamus. Her sharp claws would have torn apart anybody.

Ammit. Her bulk matched that of a trailer truck. Even Star Platinum, big and strong, became tiny in front of that being.

– I had already... called her earlier!

– Now it's too late – roared Ammit. Her roar didn't resemble that of a beast. Its impetuosity rather resembled the rumble of an avalanche.

The giant bent in pursuit of Jotaro, who was at a disadvantageous position.

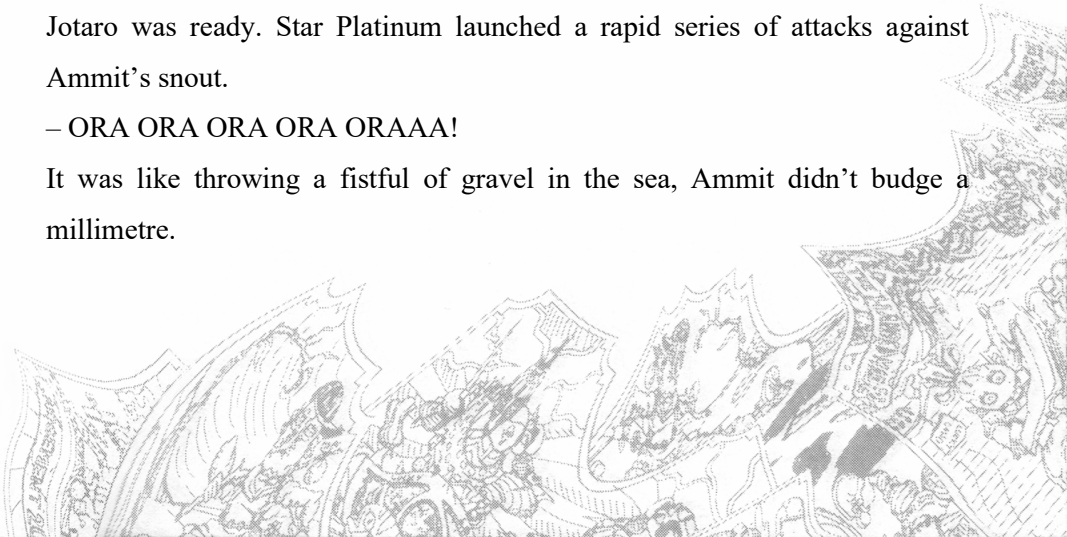
From her mouth teeth akin to pillars could be glimpsed. She spread saliva everywhere.

– Go... to hell!

Jotaro was ready. Star Platinum launched a rapid series of attacks against Ammit's snout.

– ORA ORA ORA ORA ORAAA!

It was like throwing a fistful of gravel in the sea, Ammit didn't budge a millimetre.



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– ORA ORA ORA ORA ORAAA!

No luck. Jotaro bolted backwards, ferociously attacked by Ammit. The latter chased him with her maws wide open, aimed at his chest.

The heart was Ammit's favourite meal.

– ORA ORA O--

The voice of Jotaro's Star Platinum was interrupted. At the same time, the roars around them died down. Had they finally met their end?

Wrong.

It wasn't Jotaro who vanished, but Ammit the beast-goddess.

– Disa... ppeared? Vani... shed... but how is it possible?

Against the old man's will, Ammit disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

– It's... not... possible!

In the meantime, dizzily shaking his withered arms, he rushed to browse through the pages of *The Genesis of Universe*. Then his scrawny fingers located a spot.

There was a tiny hole.

Something had perforated the hieratic text.

– No… way...

It had been Joestar.

Joestar's and Polnareff's preceding attack hadn't been done randomly.

Joestar had been able to read the contents of *The Genesis of Universe* thanks to Hermit Purple's vines and Polnareff, listening to what Joestar read, had pierced the characters in some pages thanks to Silver Chariot's sword.

– I wasn't out of tricks. I had a bit of knowledge and my Hermit Purple's clairvoyant abilities.

Even with both of those I only managed to decipher the titles of the pages in broad terms. Then the tip of Polnareff's sabre did the rest – said Joestar to the old man, despite his pain. – But it was enough. I foresaw that your deathblow would have used the most horrific thing described in this book. And you did exactly that. That's Joseph Joestar's battle intuition. I would say I haven't lost my touch.

– You... have... damaged... the history... the great history. This is serious... to say the least... unforgivable – said the old man with a tremulous voice.

– Well, what do you intend to do?

– It doesn't matter. You just removed... only... few characters. This... *The Genesis of Universe*... still... stores... many more... events. I'm left... with plenty of choices... on how to kill you.

Remaining still, he got ready to browse through the pages for the umpteenth time. There was enough time. Jotaro was knocked away thanks to Ammit's attack, and so he was out of his Stand Star Platinum's range. He wouldn't be able to make it in time.

The old man was about to read, but Star Platinum was quicker and threw against him a shiny little object. The drops of a crystal-clear liquid spread in front of his eyes.

The hoarse yell was proof of his agony. He rubbed his eyes with the bony arms and while screaming he let *The Genesis of Universe* fall.

– Aaahhh! The eyes, the eyes! My eyes!

– It was of poor quality, I was right to not use it.

Jotaro cautiously got closer to the suffering old man.

– What the hell... did you... do? What have... you... done?

– I guess this wasn't written in your book. Well, it's a cologne made of lotus flower, typical of Egypt.

– Damn you!

Jotaro had thrown him the small bottle of perfume he had bought, rather, had been forced to buy earlier from the peddler. That tiny flacon of little value had hit the old man and the contents got sprinkled on his face.

– Didn't you say I... had to be judged?

– My... *The Genesis of Universe*!

He rubbed his eyes with his right hand and despairingly felt the surface at his feet with his left hand.

But *The Genesis of Universe* was already in Jotaro's hands.

– What a grimy book.

– Give it back... it's... mine. *The Genesis of Universe*... it's... mine... mine alone... give it back!

Jotaro wasn't facing a Stand User with four thousand years of Egyptian history on his shoulders anymore. At this point he wasn't anything but a withered old man close to death.

– Listen, even if you're very old, I won't go easy on you. I'm warning you!

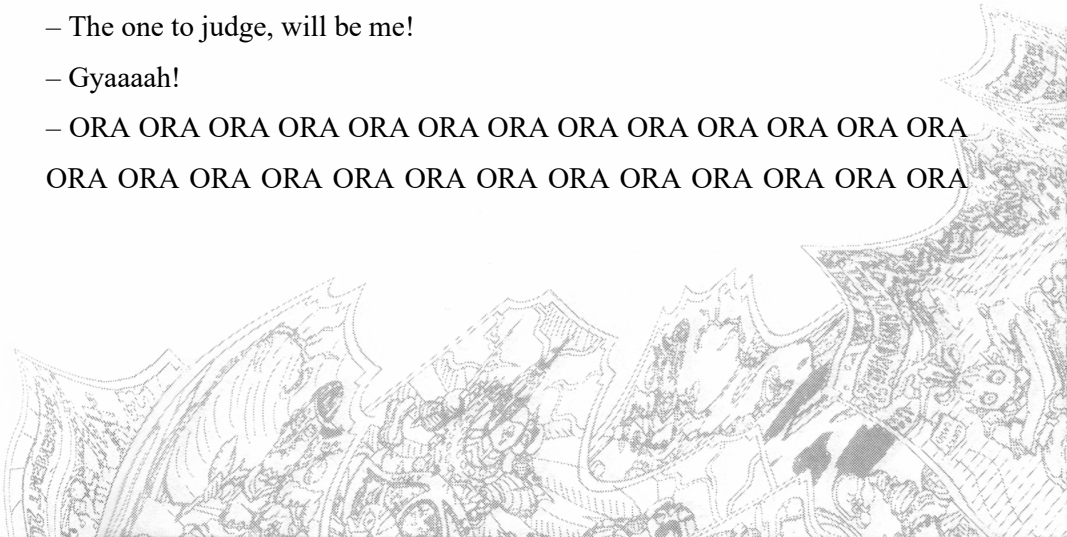
– Hawaaaooh! – the old man let out a weird cry.

Behind Jotaro silently appeared Star Platinum. Its right hand slowly made a fist, then…

– The one to judge, will be me!

– Gyaaaah!

– ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA



ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORAAAAAAA!

The old man's body got hammered down by a flurry of hits. He resembled a mummy because *he was* a mummy in every aspect. He turned into ash and dissipated into the air in microscopic particles.

He hadn't been a human being in a long time.

The punches of Star Platinum provoked a variation in pressure and all of that dust vanished into Cairo's sky.

At the same time that the old man was scattered, *The Genesis of Universe* that was in Jotaro's hands turned into dirt and spilled from between his fingers. It had become a reddish brown dirt and ended up mixing with the ground of Cairo. *The Genesis of Universe* had disappeared once and for all from the face of the earth.

Later...

Fortunately, Joestar's fractures were nothing to be concerned about. The sword that pierced Abdul also missed any vital organs. Polnareff had been hit in several spots, but none of them had threatened his life. After having received appropriate treatments, they all met again in a café.

– Then, Jotaro? If it hadn't been for my fast reflexes, by now you'd be wandering the world of the dead for all eternity!

– Give me a break, grandpa – said Jotaro, sour due to Joestar's ironic giggle.

– Eh no, Mr. Joestar. If it hadn't been for the intervention of my Silver Chariot, I don't know how it would have ended! – intervened Polnareff.

– Well in any case, it was me who had the idea. You shouldn't forget that.

– Tsk. Anyway, even if we were beaten twice by that ugly old man, the most important thing is that we made it out alive.

– C'mon, don't make that long face! –

– But... – It was Abdul who, with his head still bandaged and sore, had butted in the lively conversation between Joestar and Polnareff. – But what happened exactly?

– In the end who was that old man? He called himself Ani the Scribe, but had he really lived for millenniums or it was just a crazy megalomaniac?

– Hmm...

Silence was the protagonist.

– Well, we'll never have an answer either way – said Joestar sipping coffee and turning towards Jotaro.

– What do you say?

The reply was disappointing, but perhaps it was the only one that fit just right at the ending of that bizarre battle.

– It's not that important. At any rate, it's just sand in the desert...

POSTSCRIPT

In principle, a manga author is unable to reread his own work and enjoy it. It's because of this that I find extraordinary the fact that every so often versions of my works are made involving media other than the comics themselves.

JoJo's Bizarre Adventure has already been given several adaptations, from the Drama CDs to the animated series (and, later on, multiple video games), and now there's also a novel.

Through other authors' reimaginings I'm able to understand much more about my own work. I can experience it from a completely different point of view, like that of a reader, for example, and comprehend what aspects have interested the audience, and which perhaps I had never noticed. It is a bit like travelling around the world and distance yourself from your own home country, Japan in my case, and rediscover its charm precisely because people from other nations spoke to you enthusiastically about it.

To enjoy your own work from the point of view of a reader and discover new things is, in short, an experience without

comparison. In this case, it was even more so because I found myself having to create the illustrations, based on the story that other authors came up with, and which is greatly different from what I usually make.

A manga page and an illustration are more different than what one might normally think, and I was very apprehensive despite *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* being my own creation. While making them, I kept asking myself if the illustrations were like what the novel's authors had imagined.

At the same time, I was working on producing the fourth part of *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*, whose protagonist was Josuke Higashikata. In the book, instead, the characters from the third part show up, Jotaro and Joseph Joestar, Polnareff and Kakyoin, Abdul and Iggy, who were and still are for me like old friends.

Working together with them again was truly moving for me.

Hirohiko Araki

Italian edition note

Le Bizzarre Avventure di JoJo constitutes the longest Japanese comic book series ever published in Italy. Thanks to its structure (now commonly called ‘generational saga’), it has successfully been able to span an entire decade. Starting from the distant November, 1993, when it cropped up on Italian bookstalls, which was when the publishing phenomenon of manga was still in its beginning.

What would have initially seemed like a miniseries taking place in the United Kingdom at the end of the 1800s created some characters that caught everyone’s attention. Among them was Jonathan Joestar (the protagonist), Dio Brando (the bad guy), and the thug Speedwagon.

It was an action horror, which concluded leaving a door open for future events, thanks to the theory of the Ripple (a breathing technique aimed at dramatically improving physical faculties) and the mysterious Stone Mask (thanks to which a human being could become immortal).

The foundations were laid. And thus, in the second part the genius Hirohiko Araki could pick up the Joestar’s family strange events through one of their descendants, Joseph, who around the time of the Second World War finds himself taking up the task of saving the world from a menace of the ancient world. With that problem solved, Joseph can peacefully grow old until the day when, in the late half of the 80s, the threat of Dio Brando once again shakes things up for the Joestar family. And with this they develop the mysterious and powerful Stands.

It is right during this third part that the two stories of this book take place, that is, while the crusaders are headed to Cairo in the hopes of permanently putting to rest the evilest of comic book villains ever created. Cruel and immoral

enough to go as far as to join his head to his adoptive brother Jonathan Joestar's body in order to continue his dark existence in this world.

This book should be read as if it were an extra episode (or rather, two) of the comic book series, like some sort of sunken treasure that is found after many years. The manga of *Le Bizzarre Avventure di JoJo* is still being published in our country, and has reached the sixth part, taking place in 2011, where the protagonist is Jolyne Kujo, daughter of the same Jotaro present in these pages. In the meantime, the public has also become captivated by the events narrated in the urban thriller of the fourth part, taking place in 1999 (with Josuke Higashikata, illegitimate son of a very old Joseph), and the gangster tale of the fifth part, taking place in 2001 (Giorno Giovanna, descendant of Dio Brando and – for the reasons described previously – of Jonathan Joestar). And it is during this part, the entirety of which develops on Italian ground, where the next novel of *Le Bizzarre Avventure di JoJo* takes place, soon to be published by Kappa Edizioni.

Andrea Baricordi

Translators' notes:

◇**AzoreanEve**: Last time I said I learnt a lot of Italian and some Japanese along the way, but this time I simply learnt not to trust any translators at all. Imagine my surprise when the Italian book was stroke-inducing. So please don't read that one, for your own mental health. This was still overall a fun, albeit very tiring experience, with lots of stuff happening along the way, including a global pandemic, lol. Now we both need some rest, especially Lesbicattiva. Oh, and it's a shame that Araki-sensei apparently only drew Dark Mirage once. But if you want more art of Ani and his stand, there's the Jump Novel #4.

◇**Lesbicattiva**: Wow! And with this all the JOJO novels should be translated in English! Honestly, since it's the last, I'm beginning to think it's a bit cursed: the first copy got either stolen by my ex or lost, the second one I ordered as a replacement was badly damaged and the third, which was luckily the last one available, had some ink stains! And when we finally got the book in our hands we found out that the italian translation was so bad that it resulted more in a 'salvage' operation than an actual translation. Not to mention that while translating the pandemic broke out, Italy was put in a complete lockdown for three months, and my laptop died. In this time I also got heavily sick and, having to undergo a surgery, I thus had to delegate a lot of my pages to AzoreanEve (who, during these six or seven months, probably attained sainthood; both because of the infinite number of jpn/ita cross-checking and my heap of mistakes). Anyway, Absalom's story was very bittersweet and definitely my favourite, hope you enjoy our hard work!

JUMP J BOOKS

ジョジョの奇妙な冒険

荒木飛呂彦●関島眞頼●山口宏

SHUEISHA

JUMP J BOOKS

HIROHIKO ARAKI was born in Sendai in 1960 in the Miyagi Prefecture. His debut into the manga world came in 1980 in the pages of the "Shonen Jump" magazine, with his short western themed tale Poker Under Arms. After some other one-shots and a couple miniseries such as Cool Shock B.T. and Gorgeous Irene, he publishes the miniseries Baoh which gets him the public's attention. However his great success came in 1987 with JoJo's Bizarre Adventure, a saga currently made up of 6 distinct parts, linked together by the family bonds of the protagonists and by the immortal enemy in common. Among his best works, Under Execution Under Jailbreak from 1995 and the current work in progress, The Lives of Eccentrics.

MAYORI SEKIJIMA was born in 1959 and has had collaborations with the prestigious studios Tatsunoko and Tezuka Production. Among his most popular works, the characters and scripts for the animated TV series Tekkaman Blade and Legend of Heavenly Sphere Shurato.

HIROSHI YAMAGUCHI was born in 1964 and for years has worked on scripts for Japanese television. Particularly, his specialities are animated cartoons and live action shows. His repertoire also includes some video games, among which is Shin Momotaro Densetsu.

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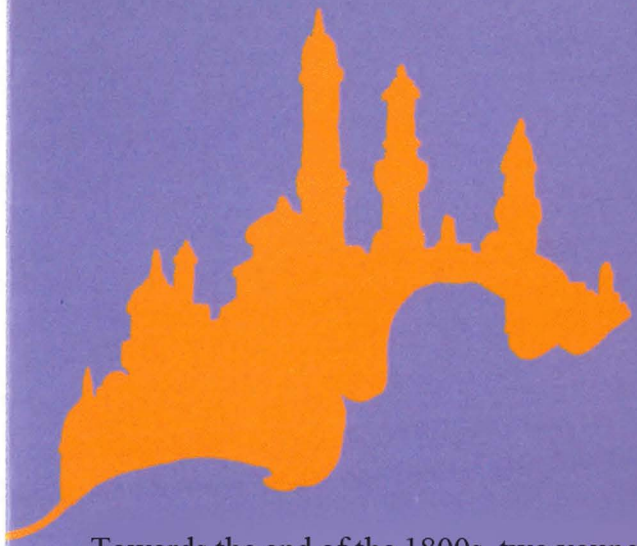

Towards the end of the 1800s, two young men got entangled in a battle which went down in history.
These two young men were called Jonathan Joestar and Dio Brando.
Both fell into the depths of the Atlantic Ocean and the battle seemed to come to an end.
Then, many years passed.
Dio, who had obtained immortality, stole Jonathan's body and came back to life by joining himself with it.
Dio, the dark ruler, is now secretly plotting to take over the world.
By some ironic twist of fate, it was Jonathan's descendants who sensed his resurrection and intentions.
These descendants are Joseph Joestar and Jotaro Kujo.
This novel narrates a fantastic adventure, where Jonathan's descendants, together with some trusted friends, fight to bring Dio to his defeat.

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Araki • Sekijima • Yamaguchi

LE BIZZARRE AVVENTURE DI JOJO

KAPPA EDIZIONI